The knight from nowhere : a biographical case study of social mobility in Victorian Britain

‘The Knight from Nowhere’: A Biographical Case Study of Social Mobility in Victorian Britain

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Abstract

This study re-examines social mobility in Victorian Britain, focusing on the experiences of the actor Henry Irving (1838-1905). Irving rose from 'humble' beginnings to become one of the most respected men in Victorian society, and was the first actor to receive a knighthood. The Victorians celebrated the possibilities of social mobility, or 'self-making' as they termed it, through independence, diligence and thrift, pointing to exemplary figureheads such as Irving. But self-making was a cultural fantasy, and this study tracks Irving's experiences to investigate the realities of his unusual achievement.

I explore life in the rural and urban places where Irving lived, and position him within cultures of education, theatre, and artistic bohemia. In this way I signal the importance of such contexts in modulating experience, behaviour, and bodily comportment. I demonstrate that the Victorians interpreted status through the effect of the presence of the body in social interaction and understood society as consisting of two groups, the polite and the vulgar. As Irving left behind the lower middle-class social circles of his youth that conditioned and constrained his bodily practices, and entered new social circles, he changed the way he spoke, presented himself and moved his body. Without this bodily reconditioning, I argue, Irving would not have achieved what he did.

This is not just a biographical narrative of one individual's life. Rather, it is a study of the importance of the particular in historical analysis. It is about how the individual negotiated wider processes, practices and ideas in Victorian Britain, and the ways in which these factors shaped his experience. I show how a focused analysis of one man, his body, his life experiences and his representation in auto/biography can yield new insights into power relations, cultures of class, and social mobility in the Victorian period.

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List of Abbreviations

TNA	The National Archives
GRO	General Register Office
ESW	England, Scotland and Wales
HLC	Honnold/Mudd Library for the Claremont Colleges, Claremont, CA
THM	Victoria & Albert Museum Theatre and Performance Collection
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives
HTC	Harvard Theatre Collection
IOR	India Office Records
BL	British Library
ODNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

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Introduction

On the evening of the fourth of July 1883 six hundred people came together in the magnificent grandeur of St James's Hall in London for a banquet to celebrate the professional achievements of the actor Henry Irving (1838-1905). The occasion was called to wish Irving well on the eve of his departure for his theatre company's first tour of the USA. The guests included many of the most powerful and eminent men of the time, including aristocrats, courtiers, politicians, lawyers, academics, artists and men of letters, officers of the armed services, bankers and businessmen. Surrounding Irving were seated the Lord Chief Justice of England, Lord Coleridge (1820-1894), Admiral Sir Henry Keppel (1809-1904) and General Sir Dighton Probyn (1833-1924), the painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912), the American diplomat James Russell Lowell (1819-1891), the politician and former viceroy of India Viscount Baring (1826-1904), the celebrated physicist Professor John Tyndall (1820-1893) and other prominent and distinguished men.[1]

Celebratory banquets were not in themselves unusual occurrences in the Victorian period. What was more unusual about this particular gathering was the social background of the man that it honoured. Henry Irving's beginnings would be described as 'humble' in nineteenth-century parlance, and indeed his contemporaries used this term about his social background.[2] He was born John Brodribb in 1838 in the village of Keinton Mandeville in Somerset, and assumed the stage name Henry Irving in 1856.[3] His father Samuel appears to have failed as a commercial traveller before he moved to London and found work as a clerk.[4] Samuel's various occupations never yielded a plentiful income for the Brodribb household, and it is likely that for this reason Irving's education was very basic: he received two years of private schooling before joining a firm of solicitors as an

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[1] Austin Brereton, *Henry Irving: A Biographical Sketch* (London: David Bogue, 1883), 98.

[2] Alfred Darbyshire, *The Art of the Victorian Stage* (London: Sherratt & Hughes, 1907), 89.

[3] Actors commonly assumed stage names in the nineteenth century.

[4] Samuel Brodribb's occupation is listed as 'Clerk': TNA, 1851 ESW Census, HO107/1532/19/12, and 'Auctioneer Clerk and House Keeper': TNA, 1861 ESW Census, RG09/229/5/8.

office boy at the age of thirteen.[5] When he was eighteen Irving left his desk-job and became an actor. From this limited start in life Irving rose to become an eminent figure in Victorian society, and was the first actor to be knighted. In his obituary of Irving in 1905 the writer Max Beerbohm (1872-1956) described him as 'The Knight from Nowhere'.[6]

In Irving's own lifetime he came to be lauded as the archetypal self-made man, seemingly fulfilling the powerful Victorian credo that those who work hard succeed. Writing in 1883 at the zenith of Irving's career, his first official biographer Austin Brereton (1862-1922), for example, described him in such terms: 'He had no one to depend upon, no one to drag or thrust him forward; nothing to work upon but his own ability... He faced all manner of difficulties and bore them down with a resolution and courage that nothing could stand against'.[7] Bram Stoker (1847-1912), with whom Irving worked closely at the Lyceum Theatre for more than twenty years, also commented on Irving's work ethic in his 1906 biography of the actor: 'Irving was determined from the very first to strain every nerve for the honour of his art... He forewent very many of the ordinary pleasures of life, and laboured unceasingly and without swerving from his undertaken course'.[8]

In reality in a society in which mobility of a modest nature was all that most people could achieve, Irving's rise was uncommon. This thesis looks at how he did this, and in so doing it re-examines upward social mobility in the Victorian period. It explores why some individuals were able to break free from the material and cultural inequalities of their early years, whilst others were not. I examine life in the rural and urban places where Irving lived, and position him within cultures of education, theatre, and artistic bohemia in order to suggest the importance of such contexts in modulating experience, behaviour, and bodily comportment. The central argument is that the Victorians interpreted status through the effect of the physical presence of the body in social interaction and understood society as consisting of two groups, the polite and the vulgar, based on differences in bodily practices and behaviour. Bodily practices in this thesis

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[5] Austin Brereton, *The Life of Henry Irving* (London: Longmans Green, 1908), vol. I.

[6] Max Beerbohm, *Around Theatres*, vol. II. (London: William Heinemann, 1924), 173.

[7] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 75.

[8] Bram Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (London: William Heinemann, 1906).

refer to the ways in which men moved and held their bodies, the accent with which they spoke and the delivery of their speech; behaviour refers to social manners, the content of speech, and the sense they had of themselves. As Irving left behind the lower middle-class social circles of his youth that conditioned and constrained his bodily practices and behaviour and entered new social circles, he changed the way he spoke, presented himself and moved his body. Without this reconditioning, I argue, Irving would not have achieved what he did.

I further show that Irving was far from 'independent'. I suggest that he was shaped by multiple intersecting contexts and was reliant on a network of 'friends' whose role in his achievements was crucial. In the first biography of Irving's life there was no mention of the role this network played in his success. This biography, which Irving commissioned and edited himself, was a misleading representation of his life, and indicates Irving's attempt to position himself as an archetypal self-made man and a 'natural' artistic genius. Through this device Irving aligned himself with the positive connotations of these Victorian cultural ideas. The fictions Irving constructed about himself became assumed fact and this story of his life appeared repeatedly in subsequent auto/biographies and newspaper accounts thereafter. In this thesis I will unravel these fictions by reading his biography against the evidence of his life, and I will explore the cultures of class that, I suggest, compelled Irving to construct such stories. In particular the idea of authentic and fraudulent identity emerges as a narrative concern in polite culture.[9] Socially mobile men like Irving disrupted perceived boundaries and social hierarchies, and generated anxiety amongst his contemporaries.

Methodology

This study is not just a biographical narrative of one individual's life. Rather, it is a study of the importance of the particular in historical analysis. In this sense it combines the

[9] For a discussion of authentic identity in historical perspective see introduction to Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). On anxieties around imposters in the nineteenth century see James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), chap. 2; Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

strengths of micro-history and biography, and I will use the term 'biographical case study' to distinguish it from conventional biography and other kinds of micro-history that focus on specific events or localities. It is about how the individual negotiated wider processes, practices and ideas in Victorian Britain, and it explores the ways in which these factors might have shaped his experience. There were inevitably shifts in practices and ideas during the Victorian period, but also a degree of interweaving and overlap between them, and I will demonstrate how studying one individual brings these aspects into sharper focus.[10] Whilst the individual is the subject, as historian Jill Lepore argues, 'microhistorians' subjects are only devices'.[11] But in order to make wider observations it is necessary to recapitulate biographical details about the individual. Biography is valuable because, as historian Barbara Caine has suggested, it is 'the archetypal "contingent narrative", the one best able to show the great importance of particular locations and circumstances as well as the multiple layers of historical change and experience.'[12] Some social historians have started to move away from narratives of collective experience to focus more on individual lives as part of the relatively new 'biographical turn' in history because of the fresh insights it can provide into established historical narratives and frameworks, and this study joins that growing body of work.[13]

Although the biographical case study method has a long lineage in the social sciences dating back to early social researchers such as Henry Mayhew in the mid nineteenth century, many historians are sceptical about the value of the particular for making effective broader generalisations.[14] In historian Richard D. Brown's words, 'the

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[10] For a discussion of the overlap and instability of ideas in society see Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England, Women in Culture and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[11] Jill Lepore, 'Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography', *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): 144.

[12] Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.

[13] See for example Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Nancy W. Ellenberger, *Balfour's World: Aristocracy and Political Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (Martlesham: The Boydell Press, 2015); Seth Koven, T*he Match Girl and the Heiress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[14] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London: Woodfall, 1851). On the value of case studies and issues of typicality see Giovanni Levi, 'On Microhistory', in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke, 2nd ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001). For more

greatest problem for micro-historians has not been myopic timidity or their reluctance to generalise, but the reverse'.[15] But this thesis makes no extrapolations or generalising claims about the biographical case study method. What happened to Irving was possible only in the social, economic and political context of the mid-Victorian period, but his experiences were also specific to his personal circumstances. My argument therefore flags the significance of the heterogeneity of individuals, their local circumstances and the specific contexts of their lives.

Previous histories on social mobility have tended to focus on the manoeuvring that occurred within the highest echelons of society.[16] The limited historiography focusing specifically on social mobility between the lower and upper middle classes, the point at which I suggest the division between the polite and vulgar occurred, has suggested that upward movement was difficult for material, structural or cultural reasons. Geoffrey Crossick, for example, argues that although there was movement within and between the working class and lower middle class, opportunities for mobility beyond the lower middle class became increasingly limited due to changes in the composition of the labour market, the growth of the scale of enterprise and capitalisation, and changes in working practices during the second half of the nineteenth century.[17] Andrew Miles's empirical study of social mobility in the nineteenth century

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recent discussion of microhistory see John Brewer, 'Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life', *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 1 (1 March 2010): 87–109.

[15] Richard D. Brown, 'Microhistory and the Post-Modern Challenge', *Journal of the Early Republic* 23, no. 1 (1 April 2003): 14.

[16] See, for example, L. Stone and J.C.F. Stone, *An Open Elite?: England, 1540-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); David Spring and Eileen Spring, 'Social Mobility and the English Landed Elite', *Canadian Journal of History* XXI, no. 3 (1986); Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); F. M. L Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963); Y. Cassis, 'Bankers in English Society in the Late Nineteenth Century', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 38, no. 2 (1 May 1985): 210–29; M.L. Bush, *The English Aristocracy: A Comparative Synthesis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement* (London: Longmans, Green, 1959); P. J Corfield, *Power and the Professions in Britain, 1700-1850* (London: Routledge, 1995); Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London: Routledge, 1989); W. J. Reader, *Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966); W. D. Rubinstein, 'Education and the Social Origins of British Elites 1880-1970', *Past & Present* 112, no. 1 (1986): 163; Howard Malchow, *Gentlemen Capitalists: The Social and Political World of the Victorian Businessmen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

[17] Geoffrey Crossick, 'The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain: A Discussion', in *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 11–60. See also Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society* (London: Routledge, 1971); G.L. Anderson, 'The Social Economy of Late-Victorian Clerks', in *The Lower Middle Class*, ed. Crossick; Michael Sanderson, 'Literacy

provides evidence to support these histories, demonstrating that intra-generational mobility between lower middle- and upper middle-class occupational locations was limited.[18] Longitudinal statistical studies of literacy levels and social mobility also support these histories. David Mitch uses marriage registers to measure increased literacy levels on occupational mobility, and his findings indicate a positive but limited rise.[19] Jason Long has also shown that education made little difference to intergenerational occupational mobility across the working and lower middle classes in the mid-Victorian period.[20] And P.J. Dixon argues that prolonged education was already restricted to the few because it was expensive and few lower middle-class parents had ambitions for a higher level of education for their sons than just above literacy level. Anything beyond what was sufficient to get sons placed in an administrative career was deemed unnecessary expenditure.[21]

Whilst these histories provide solid groundwork for my study none of them provide sufficient explanation as to how some individuals managed to overcome significant material and cultural boundaries against the odds. It does not wholly explain why Irving, who had very little schooling or financial support, was able to move from a lower middle-class to an upper middle-class position during the course of his life. This is in part because these studies have been undertaken on the macro-level. Only W.D. Rubinstein has suggested that historians should look closely at the biographical details of individuals to scrutinise what level of financial legacy they had been left, or what elite educational opportunities or entry into business or profession they received to assess the accuracy of the label 'self-made'.[22] Although he raises this caveat, Rubinstein's own study

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and Social Mobility in the Industrial Revolution in England', *Past & Present*, no. 56 (1 August 1972): 75–104; Harold Perkin, 'The Recruitment of Elites in British Society Since 1800', *Journal of Social History* 12, no. 2 (1 December 1978): 222–34.

[18] Andrew Miles, *Social Mobility in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).

[19] David Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

[20] Jason Long, 'The Socio-Economic Return to Primary Schooling in Victorian England', *Journal of Economic History* 66, no. 04 (December 2006): 1026–1053.

[21] P.J. Dixon, 'The Lower Middle Class Child in the Grammar School: A Lancashire Industrial Town 1850-1875', in *Educating the Victorian Middle Class*, ed. Peter Searby (Leicester: History of Education Society, 1982).

[22] W. D Rubinstein, *Men of Property: The Very Wealthy in Britain Since the Industrial Revolution* (London: Croom Helm, 1981).

of the very wealthy in the nineteenth century does not look at the micro-level. My study attempts to look closely at the micro-level in order to identify other factors in play that will enhance and nuance our understanding of social mobility in the Victorian period.

One factor that has emerged as significant for social mobility in this study is the strength of the individual's network, and again this is a new way of thinking about this subject. The practice of 'friendship' was a fundamental aspect of society in the mid-Victorian period, and played a pivotal role in Irving's social mobility. Historian Naomi Tadmor has investigated the definition and practice of 'friendship' in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and I suggest that this practice was still predominant in the nineteenth century too.[23] Tadmor argues that the term 'friend' was interchangeably used to designate a wide range of relationships from related kin to non-related supporters such as patrons, guardians, employers, business associates, political allies, companions and members of social circles. Networks of friendship were of fundamental importance to the social order, and Tadmor demonstrates that they occurred not only between social equals, but also between individuals from different social ranks. She evidences the social and occupational dimensions that friendship could bring, including companionship, pleasure, emotional support and encouragement, business opportunities, political alliances and financial assistance. Crucially, friendship was understood to be reciprocal and both parties gained something from their relationship. In this sense they were forms of exchange outside the cash nexus. I suggest that this practice was still a taken-for-granted aspect of social relations in the mid-Victorian period, and this thesis explores this relationship and its meanings further, particularly in relation to male-male friendship. Irving's social milieu shifted several times throughout his childhood and adolescence, and when he began his career on the stage it changed again and quickly expanded. I will show how individuals in Irving's network supported, influenced and enabled him through these years.

I will also consider the extent to which Irving's achievements were due to his innate abilities or to his life experiences. Was Irving simply an intrinsically exceptional person? Many historians since the 1960s have attempted to examine the complexities of

[23] Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship, and Patronage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

personality by taking a psychoanalytically informed methodology. But the critical issues inherent in using psychoanalytic theory to understand the actions of historical actors make it a contentious methodological approach.[24] Alexander and Taylor argue that psychoanalysis is an invaluable aid in understanding the minds of historical figures, but acknowledge that 'the insights that psychoanalysis yields into past minds are hypothetical and provisional'.[25] In recent years historians have become more sensitive to acknowledging the inconsistencies in people's lives in the past without using psychoanalytic ideas. Some argue that it is important to attend to the particularities of individuals operating in societies in which there was a complex interplay of ideas, practices and circumstances on micro and macro levels which led to varieties of actions, responses and outcomes.[26] The argument in this thesis registers that there are unknown or unfathomable elements of the individual that affect their agency, and I acknowledge that, in the words of Alexander and Taylor, 'no history or general psychology can ever fully account for' people's idiosyncrasies: human nature is evidently variable and individuals behave and react differently to external circumstances.[27] But what I can do is suggest, from the close biographical detail of Irving's upbringing, the effects that the experiences of his formative years might have had on his later decisions, actions and behaviour.

Theories of performance and performativity provide useful frameworks through which to interpret Irving's bodily practices and behaviour. The consideration of the continuity between on- and off-stage performance is clearly relevant to my study, particularly given that Irving often acted the role of the gentleman. Other scholars have provided useful overviews of performance theories that could be used to interpret the

[24] For an overview see Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, "Introduction," in *History and Psyche: Culture, Psychoanalysis, and the Past*, ed. Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1–10. See also T. G. Ashplant, "Psychoanalysis in Historical Writing," *History Workshop*, no. 26 (December 1, 1988): 102–19; Sally Alexander, "Feminist History and Psychoanalysis," *History Workshop*, no. 32 (October 1, 1991): 128–33.

[25] Alexander and Taylor, 'Introduction', 7.

[26] See, for example, Cook, *Queer Domesticities*; Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[27] Alexander and Taylor, 'Introduction', 7.

body of the nineteenth-century actor.[28] My argument extends this work by using the concept of 'cultural transmission', an idea I have taken from the field of psychology. It provides a way of thinking about how bodily practices and behaviours are learnt and how they are able to change, and underscores the importance of the individual as well as his cultural context in this learning. With cultural transmission a cultural group perpetuates its behavioural features in the next generation, through contact with parents, peers and other adults and institutions.[29] The terms 'enculturation' and 'socialisation' are used when cultural transmission occurs entirely through the individual's primary culture; 'acculturation' is used when it occurs from contact with another, secondary culture. The psychologist John W. Berry defines acculturation as,

> the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups… At the individual level, it involves changes in a person's behavioural repertoire; these psychological changes come about through a long-term process… Because acculturation takes place after an individual's initial socialisation into his or her original culture, it may be viewed as a process of re-socialization.[30]

Acculturation involves the processes of 'culture shedding' and 'culture learning' whereby, over time, the individual loses features of their primary culture and acquires features of the new culture. Berry discusses cultural transmission and acculturation in the context of contemporary immigration, but I have found it useful as a way of thinking about how Irving was able to change his bodily practices and behaviour during the course of his life. The concept of 'cultural transmission' seems to mirror Irving's experiences, as he consciously struggled to 'fit in' to the new social group he moved into. Evidence suggests that it was only over time, as Irving re-socialized in a different cultural milieu, that his bodily practices and behaviour shifted and appeared more 'natural'. Berry stresses that there are individual differences in psychological acculturation, and this lends itself to the

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[28] Helen Walter, 'Artist, Professional, Gentleman: Designing the Body of the Actor-Manager, 1870-1900' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Royal College of Art, 2015); J.S. Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[29] L. L Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman, M.W., *Cultural Transmission and Evolution: A Quantitative Approach* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[30] John W. Berry, 'Acculturation', in *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research*, ed. J.E. Grusec and P.D. Hastings (London: Guilford Press, 2015), 520.

particularities of the individual in my argument: Irving's experiences of this process would not necessarily have been the same for others.

Without explicitly stating this as their purpose, some historians have demonstrated the importance of family cultures in the process of primary socialization occurring in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. David Vincent, for example, has considered the informal but crucial role of the 'domestic curriculum' in the learning process of the children of the labouring poor.[31] Paul Thompson's *The Edwardians* draws on oral histories from across the social spectrum and implicitly demonstrates the transmission of cultural practices between generations within families. He shows the influence of parents in particular in shaping the ways children moved and held their bodies, the accent with which they spoke, their social manners and the content of speech, and the sense they had of themselves.[32] Michele Cohen also demonstrates the centrality of the family and the home environment in the learning of skills of sociability and politeness, which she argues was an informal but important aspect of education in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[33] And Peter Searby's study of late Victorian and Edwardian autobiographies and oral histories shows the centrality of the family and its culture, in contrast to the school, on lower middle-class children.[34] These studies provide useful groundwork in evidencing the power of family culture in primary socialization and its importance to the individual's social position and identity in the long nineteenth century. My study seeks to take the idea of socialisation one step further, demonstrating the process of re-socialization from one class culture to another, and the importance of learning certain bodily practices and behaviour in this transition.

The concept of cultural transmission also allows me to demonstrate how bodily practices and behaviour were conditioned by both material and cultural factors. Here I

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[31] David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[32] Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians* (London: Paladin, 1979).

[33] Michèle Cohen, '"Familiar Conversation": The Role of the "Familiar Format" in Education in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England', in *Educating the Child in Enlightenment Britain: Beliefs, Cultures, Practices* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

[34] Peter Searby, 'The Schooling of Kipps: The Education of Lower Middle-Class Boys in England', in *Educating the Victorian Middle Class*, ed. Peter Searby (Leicester: History of Education Society, 1982), 113–31.

am influenced by the work of historians Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, who advocate for a socio-cultural approach when analysing social inequalities.[35] My study begins with this obvious fact in mind: individuals in Victorian society did not start on a level playing-field, and those who held or were in the position to access appropriate material resources were likely to have more opportunities in life; they were likely to be socialised in the behavioural language and bodily practices of the privileged from an early age. An individual's sense of self was then continually reinforced in myriad cultural ways at different levels – through the workings of governing and social institutions, through the ordering of public space, through ideas presented in literature and the media, through specialist but widely circulated writings associated with areas such as the law, science and medicine, and through practices of the everyday. Exercising and receiving these messages of difference from many quarters on a sustained basis over time inevitably affected the way that individuals understood themselves in relation to others. This sense of self became embodied in individuals. Furthermore these embodied differences were so pervasive and had assumed such common cultural purchase that they represented an unspoken but widely understood language in social interaction.

Chapter three expands on how education was often a factor of difference between the polite and the vulgar in the nineteenth century, but here it serves as a brief example of this socio-cultural approach. Private education was only affordable to those who could pay for it, and although elementary schooling was available more cheaply to the poor through religious and philanthropic institutions (and after 1870 by local School Boards) it was limited. Differences between the higher and lower classes, therefore, began to develop at an early age because of their involuntary material circumstances. These differences were reinforced not only through messages circulating in institutions set up by the higher classes to cater for children from lower classes but also through ideas circulating in society about education. Novels provide a source of evidence for these wider circulating ideas. Dickens' fictional character Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield* (1850), published whilst Irving was receiving his own limited schooling, draws our attention to the repeated messages about rank, humility and subordination that Heep received during his education. Dickens's description was comical to contemporary

[35] Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

readers precisely because it was recognisable, despite the absurd exaggeration of Heep's servility:

> Father and me was both brought up at a foundation school for boys… They taught us all a deal of 'umbleness… We was to be 'umble to this person, and 'umble to that; and to pull off our caps here, and to make bows there; and always to know our place, and abase ourselves before our betters… Father got made a sexton by being 'umble. He had the character, among the gentlefolks, of being such a well-behaved man… "Be 'umble, Uriah," says father to me, "and you'll get on."[36]

Heep's education took place at a philanthropic institution where he was taught that there were 'better' people than him, that there was a difference between him and 'gentlefolk', and that he needed to behave towards them with 'umbleness'. These ideas were repeated to him 'from morning to night' not only by his teachers but by another main authority figure in his life, his father.

Scope of the thesis

The timing of Irving's social rise is significant. It was during the mid-Victorian years from 1860 to 1880 in particular that Irving's mobility occurred. Wider social and cultural shifts over the second half of the nineteenth century including population growth, the expansion of transport networks, changes to the education system and increasing access to cultural institutions have often been interpreted as positive developments towards the democratization of British society and the opening up of opportunities.[37] But one suggestion that I want to make in this thesis is that the impact of these developments was at least equivocal, and indeed could be as limiting as it was enabling for social mobility. Some of the structures, practices and ideas that allowed Irving's mobility during the mid-Victorian years had changed by the late Victorian period. Irving's choice of occupation, for example, enabled him to leave behind his lower middle-class roots and construct his identity anew in the 1850s; but the Victorian stage changed rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century and limited this possibility for the next generation.

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[36] Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 639.

[37] See, for example, George Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (London: Routledge, 1965).

This is not to say that it became harder to achieve upward social mobility in the next generation – this would need substantive research – but rather to flag the significance in historical analysis once again, not only of the particular circumstances of the individual but also of the particular time and culture in which that individual lived.

The focus of this thesis is on the possibilities and limitations of upward social mobility for men rather than women. One path for men's mobility was through occupation, as Irving's story demonstrates. But respectable women were expected not to pursue any paid occupation (even though some did), and indeed this was generally seen as a marker of middle-class status for women.[38] Another factor enabling men's mobility was their ability to socialise and network, and in this sense too it appears women had less scope: they were more restricted than men in their freedom of movement across all public and private spheres at any time of the day and night – although historians have debated to what extent.[39] Furthermore, women's mobility has frequently been defined by the status of their husband's occupation in comparison to their father's, and therefore marriage would seem to play more of a role for women in their social transition than for men.[40] During the course of my research I have found evidence suggesting that bodily practices and behaviour were also crucial to women's social status, but there were clear differences between men and women in this regard. Male bodily practices and behaviour were indicative of social position but they were also demonstrative of a certain type of masculinity, and this close interrelation between gender, status and behaviour is another reason why it is not possible to generalise between the two.

Sources

The archives and the sources from which to draw evidence of Irving's life are extensive. The start of Irving's career as an actor in the late 1850s coincided with a period of rapid

[38] Susie Steinbach, *Women in England 1760-1914: A Social History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004).

[39] Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992); Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (June 1993): 383–414.

[40] Andrew Miles, 'Marriage Markets and Women's Role in Social Mobility', in *Social Mobility in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 145–75.

expansion in newspaper and journal publishing, and new styles of journalism were developing.[41] Because of this there is a huge body of written material not only about Irving's performances but also about his social appearances, his home and his life story. Details of Irving's life can be tracked through reviews, reports, feature articles and adverts in the press. This forms only part of the varied source base for evidence of his life, however. Because of Irving's celebrity status as one of the leading actors of his generation he became widely known in polite society, and his network of friends and acquaintances became extensive. For this reason he appears in the autobiographies and memoirs of many men and women. In addition, although he never wrote his own story, Irving is the subject of several biographies written both during his life and after his death. In chapter two I will contextualise the auto/biography of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century as a source, discussing how it must be read as a historically-determined genre in terms of its purpose, rhetorical devices, issues of accuracy, selection of memories, secrecies and silences, and the social conventions that policed the limits of what was possible to say. The biographies of Irving and the mentions he receives in autobiographies are largely celebratory writings of his life and achievements, and the language of self-making is visible. These texts are therefore valuable not only because they contain much information about the details of Irving's professional and social life, what he was doing, who he was with, when and where, and what he talked about, but also for the terms in which he was publicly discussed. Irving also has a large archive of letters to and from family members, friends, professional associates and fans, as well as business records from his management of the Lyceum Theatre in London. In addition, there are many extant photographs and cartoons of Irving, which provide evidence of the ways in which he constructed his image and how others perceived him.

My research also draws on wider published materials from the period including advice literature, novels, and printed media to provide evidence of ideas circulating in society about perceived differences between the polite and the vulgar. Some historians have dismissed these kinds of sources as trivial, or unreliable as evidence of how people

[41] Laurel Brake, *Print in Transition, 1850-1910: Studies in Media and Book History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Joel H Wiener, ed., *Papers for the Millions: The New Journalism in Britain, 1850s to 1914* (New York: Greenwood, 1988).

actually behaved and thought.[42] However, they are valuable here for two reasons. Firstly, whether or not they were an accurate reflection of real life, advice literature and novels were being consumed by people from different social classes and were part of their cognisance. Secondly, they provide rare evidence of the subtle perception of differences in behaviour that were so entrenched in everyday life, and were therefore taken for granted and seldom discussed.[43] They provide crucial evidence that the body was a site of experience by indicating that people recognised and felt differences in social interaction even if they found it hard to describe, to pinpoint what it was or what the causes were.[44] This thesis therefore seeks to demonstrate the importance of this sort of material for our understanding of mid nineteenth-century society.

The varied and extensive source base on Irving combined with his significant position in Victorian society has attracted the attention of many historians. There is now a substantial historiography relating to Irving, much of it analysing aspects of his theatrical productions.[45] But almost all the literature published about Irving focuses on his later years when he was actor-manager of the Lyceum Theatre. My study focuses instead on the early part of Irving's life and career, which has not received rigorous and critical exploration. This is perhaps indicative of most historians' primary interest in analysing the 'great' events in the lives of 'great men'. By focusing on Irving's early life, however, I suggest how the study of a 'great man' before he was famous might bring new insights to the interpretation of his actions in later years.

My research on Irving's life and experiences before he was professionally successful therefore provides a new reading of an important Victorian figure. It brings a different perspective to the narratives of self-making that have surrounded Irving since the late nineteenth century. Few historians have challenged this account. Helen Walter's

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[42] Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[43] On this point see Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2009).

[44] The difficulty of locating evidence for the body as a site of experience is discussed in Kathleen Canning, 'The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History', *Gender & History* 11, no. 3 (1 November 1999): 499–513.

[45] For an extensive bibliography, including over 130 books, journal articles, chapters, theses and dissertations see 'The Henry Irving Archive: Digital Resources for Scholars and Students', www.theirvingsociety.org.uk [accessed 15 May 2012].

analysis of the visual records of the leading actor-managers of the late nineteenth century is one notable exception.[46] Whilst her research does not focus specifically on deconstructing Irving's narratives of self-making, she demonstrates Irving's active role in the construction of his own public identity and the mythology surrounding his life and career. She argues that Irving, like other contemporary actor-managers, deliberately constructed the visual representation of his body in such a way as to persuade the Victorian public of his status as artist, professional and gentleman. I also argue that Irving colluded in the construction of myths about himself but my focus is on the ways in which Irving strategically shaped his written record into culturally dominant and acceptable terms, in order to shore up his social position in society. In this I follow a similar line of argument to other historians who have interrogated Victorian life writing to explore wider cultural anxieties and ideologies.[47]

Irving's 1883 biography presents a narrative of remarkable self-making, but the extant sources for his early life reveal a very different story. One question I seek to answer is why these accounts are so different and what compelled Irving to construct such impressions about his life. Biographies were usually written in order to provide memorials to close friends after their death, or as memorials requested from publishers or families of the deceased.[48] But Irving's biography was written at the height of his career for the purpose of providing the public with some background knowledge of the life of the most pre-eminent actor of the day. In an expanding media age, there was an increasing public appetite for information about leading figures; as one who was so frequently before the theatre-going public, both in London and the provinces, Irving had started to attract ardent fans hungry for information about him. The prospect of Irving's first American tour, in particular, had precipitated the necessity of publishing this biography in order to provide American audiences with some background knowledge about the star actor. The biography was published in Britain at the same time as America with the aim of satisfying the curiosity of home audiences too.

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[46] Walter, 'Artist, Professional, Gentleman'.

[47] David Amigoni, ed., *Life Writing and Victorian Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Trev Lynn Broughton, *Men of Letters, Writing Lives: Masculinity and Literary Auto/Biography in the Late Victorian Period* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[48] Caine, *Biography*.

Historians have pointed to the fictions in nineteenth-century auto/biographies. In her analysis of the autobiographies of several nineteenth-century actresses Jacky Bratton has demonstrated how different the realities of women's lives were to the narratives they constructed about themselves. For these actresses it was necessary to present another story, she argues, because of the contradictions between the ideologies of middle-class femininity and their participation in a profession that showed it to be a saleable commodity.[49] They had to adapt their stories to the emerging doctrines of gender and work in order to maintain respectability. The same could be said about Irving: he had to mould his story to the cultures of the class into which he moved in order to justify his status. Whilst inclusion in polite society was dependent on the convincing performance of certain bodily practices and behaviour, members constantly policed each other's authenticity. Suspected or known intruders into the group were measured against the ideals of polite culture including evidence of certain levels and types of wealth, education, social background, attitudes and values. Irving's polite contemporaries accepted his status as a gentleman because his bodily practices and behaviour were convincing enough; at the same time, however, they questioned this status by using these ideals to police the boundaries of their class. Irving was under constant pressure to defend his position, and one of his responses was to make aspects of his past more acceptable.

But the truth of Irving's history was far from the story presented in the 1883 biography. Just as the moral position of women in the imaginary theatre world of their autobiographies was a 'crucial site of tension in the redefinition of class' I argue that self-making narratives did the same in a society in which the realities of social mobility – and elite attitudes towards it – were incongruent with dominant cultural ideas.[50] The upward crossing of class boundaries was an uncomfortable and prevalent theme in Victorian culture, and appears frequently in Victorian drama; virtuous self-made men were 'allowed' to make this transition, in theory. But the prejudices of the established elite contradicted these ideas. I do not use Irving's 1883 biography, therefore, primarily for biographical truth (although it does provide *some* accurate factual details about his life)

[49] J.S. Bratton, 'Claiming Kin: An Experiment in Genealogical Research', in *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 171–99.

[50] Ibid., 181.

but rather to examine his constructed public image in relation to ideas of class and status.

One of the strengths of the micro-historical approach is the ability to build up a focused account of one particular person, location or event, which is persuasive precisely because of its level of detail. But the challenge of this study is in building up a 'thick description' of Irving's early life in the years before he became a star actor, since there is less archival material readily available.[51] The historical record of Irving's life was shaped by Irving himself, his contemporaries and later by Laurence Irving, whose mid twentieth-century biography of his grandfather underscored the narratives that were constructed about the actor in the late nineteenth century. Irving has therefore emerged as an over-determined figure in ways that obscure what actually happened. Much was said by and about Irving but I am primarily interested in pitting these accounts against what he did *not* say and what was *not* said about him, and interpreting the strategies behind these silences.

Finally, it is clear from what remains of Irving's archives that records have dropped away over time partly for the preservation of his reputation, leaving gaps and missing information. This is especially the case for evidence of the early part of Irving's life. My research has had to build around this challenge, and in order to provide a sense of Irving's experiences at different times of his life I have had to incorporate as evidence the accounts of other people who exemplify his experience. This material supplements Irving's archives, allowing me to build up a more detailed picture of his early life and to demonstrate the resources he had around him from which he composed himself. Whilst this reconstructive work is important, nevertheless I recognise the lacunae in Irving's historical record. This study aims to test the efficacy of this methodological approach and the persuasiveness of the picture that emerges from the available sources.[52]

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[51] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

[52] On the methodological challenge of reconstructing an over-determined figure whose story has been produced for particular purposes see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives', *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247–72.

Structure of the thesis

The structure of the thesis is broadly chronological in order to demonstrate the distance Irving travelled socially from the start of his life to the end. This chronological approach also allows for an exploration of particular experiences of Irving's life and their impact on his social mobility. The chapters present a series of social and local histories exploring rural life in Cornwall, Irving's lower middle-class community in London, and the bohemian culture of provincial and metropolitan theatre. These histories contribute to our knowledge of what it meant for an individual to live in these contexts in mid-Victorian Britain.[53] But their primary purpose – and one of the innovations of this thesis – is to suggest the impact of different local and social contexts on the conditioning of an individual's body.

Chapter one explores ideas about class and identity circulating in Victorian society, and lays the groundwork for the central claims of this thesis: that the Victorians interpreted status through bodily practices and behaviour during social interaction; that they allocated each other into two broad status groups, the polite and the vulgar, based on differences in bodily practices and behaviour; and that upward social mobility between these groups was dependent on a long process of acculturation in polite society. In this chapter I situate these claims in the historiography of class in the nineteenth century, and demonstrate how the embodiment of class and the division into two groups marks a departure from existing interpretations. Further, I challenge previous histories which have claimed that, with the rise of the industrial middle class, refined skills of sociability and polished self-presentation became increasingly irrelevant to social status. Using advice literature and novels as indicators of class differences in bodily practices and behaviours, I identify the elements of politeness that the Victorians believed were essential attributes of those who commanded the most power in society. The final part of the chapter examines the meanings, ambiguities and contradictions of three cultural ideas circulating in Victorian society that Irving harnessed in the construction of his public identity: the self-made man, the eccentric genius, and the artistic bohemian. These three cultural ideas will reappear throughout the thesis.

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[53] Barry Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Chapter two examines Irving's social background and early life in order to position him at this stage in his primary culture, the lower middle class. I provide a detailed account of Irving's life in rural Cornwall and then his home in the City of London in the middle of the nineteenth century in order to suggest the importance of these contexts for modulating his particular experience. I discuss the context for Brereton's influential 1883 biography of Irving, and argue that Irving used it as a mechanism for deflecting criticism of his lower middle-class background. In a society in which social position and hierarchies of class were fundamentally important to the dynamics of power in social relations, this was a potential weakness for Irving. In this and following chapters I draw repeatedly on this biography to demonstrate the differences between the story Irving constructed about himself and the historical record of his life in order to examine Victorian cultures of class.

Continuing with Irving's early life experiences, chapter three examines his adolescence in London in the 1850s and his growing awareness of his social position. The chapter continues to explore the significance of the particular in historical analysis, beginning with an examination of Irving's education, another of his significant weaknesses. I compare his schooling with the education of gentlemen with whom he circulated in the late nineteenth century, and demonstrate how some of Irving's contemporaries used his limited education to undermine his status. The second part of the chapter constructs Irving's expanding social network in London, focusing in some detail on the contexts of home, school and chapel in the diverse urban environment of London in order to trace the social and cultural influences on Irving as a young man.

Irving's early acting career and the structure and practices of the mid-Victorian theatre are the main focus of chapter four. Entering upon a career in the theatre was important for Irving's social rise because the working practices of the stage and the diverse social constituency of the theatrical world provided him with significant opportunities. This chapter demonstrates the impact of networking and patronage on Irving's experiences, and focuses on the friendships Irving developed with two influential actors who helped him in his career. I use these actors as short biographical case studies to demonstrate again the insights we can gain from a closer look at the individual.

The final chapter brings together the arguments and themes running through the thesis. Using autobiographies I will demonstrate that Irving's contemporaries interpreted his status through his comportment and speech during their social interactions with him. I provide evidence that Irving underwent a long process of acculturation in polite society and learnt to appear as a gentleman. I suggest that Irving's professional success went hand in hand with this change in his bodily practices and behaviour, and demonstrate how patronage was crucial for enabling this process of acculturation to occur. The chapter explores how Irving constructed his identity in the context of the bohemian world of Victorian theatre, and suggests why he was able to construct himself in such a way from his past experiences. Despite Irving's acculturation in polite society, his status was always in question because his social origins were known and oblique criticisms appeared in the press throughout his career. I suggest, as a known newcomer, Irving was held accountable to ideals of polite culture more stridently than 'authentic' gentlemen. The final part of this chapter examines the tactics he used to counter gossip about his private life, which had potentially damaging consequences for his reputation and standing in society.

In this way my thesis aims to demonstrate how a focused and detailed analysis of one man, his body, his life experiences and the way he was represented in auto/biography can effectively yield new and wider insights into the dynamics of power in social relations, cultures of class, and the possibilities and limitations of social mobility in the Victorian period.

Chapter One:
Victorian Ideas on Class and Identity

> From immemorial time the human family has been divided into two sections – the Polite and the Vulgar.[54]

In his essay 'The Rise and Progress of Universities' (1854-56) the much-respected theologian and cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) described the bodily comportment and behaviour of a gentleman. Newman is just one of many voices of authority during the Victorian period using similar terminology to describe social differences perceived about the body. I quote Newman here at length because it is an encompassing description of these perceived aspects:

> The polished manners and high-bred bearing which are so difficult of attainment, and so strictly personal when attained – which are so much admired in society, from society are acquired. All that goes to constitute a gentleman, - the carriage, gait, address, gestures, voice; the ease, the self-possession, the courtesy, the power of conversing, the talent of not offending; the lofty principle, the delicacy of thought, the happiness of expression, the taste and propriety, the generosity and forbearance, the candour and consideration, the openness of hand; - these qualities, some of them come by nature, some of them may be found in any rank, some of them are a direct precept of Christianity; but the full assemblage of them, bound up in the unity of an individual character, do we expect they can be learned from books? Are they not necessarily acquired, where they are to be found, in high society? The very nature of the case leads us to say so… it stands to reason, you cannot learn to converse till you have the world to converse with; you cannot unlearn your natural bashfulness, or awkwardness, or stiffness, or other besetting deformity, till you serve your time in some school of manners. Well, and is it not so in matter of fact? [55]

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[54] *Mixing in Society. A Complete Manual of Manners. By the Right Hon. the Countess of *******.* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1870), 2.

[55] J.H. Newman, 'Rise and Progress of Universities', in *Historical Sketches*, vol. 2, 3 vols (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1876), chapter 2.

Newman's choice of language in this passage, his use of contrasting terms such as ease and awkwardness, self-possession and bashfulness, polished manners and stiffness, is vocabulary that we shall see repeated in behavioural advice literature later in this chapter and indicates its wide usage. Newman articulates the natural superiority of gentlemen, equating vulgarity to physical 'deformity'. The familiarity of tone in the question to Newman's readers at the end of this extract suggests a recognised shared understanding of the differences between the two groups in society. And like many authors of advice literature Newman argued that the 'qualities' of gentility could only be learnt fully in the company of other gentlemen. Newman was expressing the idea that social difference was embodied.

The central claim of this thesis is that Victorians recognised social status during social interaction through the individual's bodily practices and behaviour. Bodily practices in this thesis refer to the ways in which men moved and held their bodies, the accent with which they spoke and the delivery of their speech; behaviour refers to social manners, the content of speech, and the sense they had of themselves. I suggest that the Victorians understood society as consisting of two broad groups, the polite and the vulgar, based on their interpretation of these bodily practices and behaviours. I have been led in my selection of the terms polite and vulgar by the language in common use during the nineteenth century.[56] These terms are scattered throughout the pages of the novels of the most popular mid-Victorian writers such as Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) and Charles Dickens (1812-1870). Similarly, the terms frequently appear in mid-Victorian plays such as those of the popular playwrights Tom Robertson (1829-1871) and Dion Boucicault (1820-1890). Indeed, the terms polite and vulgar, politeness and vulgarity, are visible throughout the writings of countless Victorian social commentators including towering figures such as the art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900), poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and the writer Samuel Smiles (1812-1904).

The division of class into two groups through embodiment marks a departure from preceding arguments by cutting across common understandings of the middle class,

[56] For a discussion of the uses and meanings of vulgar/vulgarity in the nineteenth century see Susan D. Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie, eds., *Victorian Vulgarity : Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

which have connected the lower- and upper-middle class through factors such as income, occupation, shared ideologies or politics. These two groups, the polite and the vulgar, were made up of diverse constituencies in terms of social origins, occupations, levels of education and incomes. And these differences, amongst other factors, contributed to the dynamics of power between individuals in face-to-face interaction.. But despite these differences, the recognition of social status and whether an individual was regarded as polite or vulgar was dependent on their comportment and behaviour. The accent, diction and content of an individual's speech were significant, but the way in which speech was delivered was also crucial to this recognition. Similarly, the way in which people moved their bodies was important. What distinguished the polite from the vulgar was a sense of assurance and self-possession visible in gesture, carriage and conversation. It was that 'unmistakeable something, as subtle as an essence' which the Victorians called 'ease'.[57] It was that intangible 'something' which Trollope claimed separated the parson's son from the butcher's son, something he felt but found so hard to describe.[58] It was a learnt behaviour so ingrained in individuals as to appear natural, but was the result of years of socialisation.

The explication of these two elements at the start of this thesis lays the groundwork for my central claim: that upward social mobility was dependent on the convincing display of polite bodily practices and behaviour, without which Irving would not have achieved what he did. The rest of the thesis demonstrates how the different contexts of Irving's early life readied him for what he was later able to achieve. It took many years for Irving to acculturate to the point where his bodily practices and behaviour appeared 'natural' in polite circles. Contemporaries attest to the difficulties many individuals had in learning how to comport themselves and behave convincingly as gentlemen. As Newman suggested, it involved being embedded in polite circles. The difficulties inherent in the process of shedding and learning class culture is one reason, I suggest, why social mobility of the kind that Irving experienced was so hard to achieve.

This chapter is in three parts. In the first part I indicate how my argument on the embodiment of class engages with existing histories of class, and importantly, how it

[57] *Mixing in Society*, 38.

[58] Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 40.

marks a departure from previous interpretations of class in the Victorian period. In order to demonstrate this I provide an overview of the influential historiographical arguments on the definitions and boundaries of class in the past sixty years. This is followed by a closer examination of the debates specifically around the constituency of the middle class, which is particularly relevant in my argument since the social mobility that Irving achieved, and which is the focus of this thesis, lies somewhere amidst this group. Historians have previously suggested that differences within the middle class can be indicated by using the terms 'lower' and 'upper', although again these terms and their boundaries have been challenged. I incorporate these terms into my account rather than rejecting them altogether, arguing that they are useful in specifying where the division between the vulgar and the polite fell. My argument therefore does not reject the terminology of class, but rather challenges how those boundaries are defined and understood.

The second part of the chapter examines Victorian perceptions about the differences between the polite and the vulgar in more detail. Here I review the historiography of masculinity in the nineteenth century, and argue that scholars have tended to focus on the cultural interest in the significance of inner moral character rather than outward behaviour as an indicator of male status. My argument is that the refined skills of sociability and polished self-presentation that were so significant for social self-advancement in the eighteenth century were far from redundant in the nineteenth century. Sociability between men, whether in public or domestic spheres, continued to be necessary for building a network of influential contacts in order to 'get on' in life: the old adage 'it's not what you know but who you know' was never more true than in the mid-Victorian years. The sheer volume of advice literature on the subject of comportment and behaviour published from the 1830s is indicative of the perceived importance of outward self-presentation. This advice literature is used to demonstrate prevailing attitudes to social difference, as well as providing a guide to the broad brush-strokes of politeness: speech, conversation and carriage.

The final part of this chapter examines the meanings of three ideas circulating in Victorian society that Irving harnessed in the construction of his public identity: the self-made man, the eccentric genius, and the artistic bohemian. Throughout this thesis I

argue that Irving found it necessary to use the positive aspects of these Victorian cultural ideas to strengthen and protect his reputation, especially when he reached the height of his acting career in the 1880s. There were aspects of Irving's past and in his private affairs that made him vulnerable to criticism, in particular his social background, education, disastrous marriage, and problems with debt. The following chapters discuss these aspects of Irving's past in greater detail but here I will examine the emergence and meanings of self-making, eccentricity and bohemianism as the Victorians understood them in order to contextualise the strategies Irving used to counter compromising stories about his private life. The last part of this chapter, therefore, examines the ambiguities and contradictions of cultural ideas at play in Victorian Britain, and how one individual negotiated his way with them in order to validate his social position.

The embodiment of class

The notion that behaviour was innate and embodied in individuals was a repeated trope in Victorian texts. Representations of the male body connected appearance and behaviour with ideas about the natural distinctions between men from different social classes. The widespread practice of physiognomy, the study of facial traits, and how they are interpreted in relation to character, contributed to this classifying project. The practice was, according to historian Sharrona Pearl, so endemic that it 'achieved almost universal penetration into the Victorian consciousness'.[59] The shape of bodily parts such as the face, forehead, nose, eyes, hands and feet were linked to behaviour and character. The elite male body was often represented as tall, straight, refined, elegant, and with the advent of 'muscular Christianity' from the 1850s, physically fit and strong too. These depictions were linked to ideas of healthiness, physical control and mental superiority. In contrast the working-class male body was often depicted as savage, simian, ugly, thick-set, rough, sexualised, undisciplined or dirty, and was associated with simplicity, ignorance, criminality and lack of bodily control.[60] The bodies and features of lower middle-class men were also largely represented in a less than flattering contrast to the

[59] Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 2.

[60] On the contrasting images of the civilised and grotesque body see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986).

bodies of men in higher classes. Lower middle-class men were portrayed as pale, thin and haggard and their physical features were linked to scheming pushiness, small-mindedness or ignorance.[61]

In the last twenty years historians have increasingly turned their attention to the analysis of the body in history, demonstrating the new perspectives that such an approach brings to our understanding of the past.[62] Historians have interpreted representations of the classed male body as manifestations of the anxieties caused by the underlying social and economic changes in the Victorian years. Pearl, for example, argues that Londoners in the nineteenth century read faces, hairstyles and other forms of self-decoration in order to distinguish people in an increasingly confusing and crowded environment; in a fast-paced world, physiognomy offered 'a way to make quick-and-dirty judgements without the burdens of lengthy encounters and conversations'.[63] Historians have also suggested that contrasting representations between higher- and lower-class male bodies reflected unease about a social 'threat from below': in a society in which increasing education, wealth and consumption started to blur traditional class boundaries, men's bodies became part of narratives reinforcing class distinctions.[64] Others have suggested that representations of the body were part of a politicised range of discussions that reflected fears over social degeneracy and national strength.[65]

These studies analyse nineteenth-century male bodies in the discursive sense that Kathleen Canning has identified, as 'signifiers – of nation or state power, of social formations or dissolutions, of moral or hygienic visions and dangers, as sites of intervention or inscriptive surfaces "on which laws, morality, values, power, are

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[61] On the literary representation of the lower middle class see Arlene Young, *Culture, Class, and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents, and Working Women* (Basingstoke, 1999).

[62] For early discussions of the field see Kathleen Canning, "The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History," in *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class & Citizenship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Caroline Bynum, "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 1 (October 1, 1995): 1–33. For a more recent overview of history, masculinity and embodiment see Ava Baron, "Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historian's Gaze," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 69 (April 1, 2006): 143–60.

[63] Pearl, *About Faces*, 4.

[64] Daniel Bivona and Roger Henkle, *The Imagination of Class: Masculinity and the Victorian Urban Poor* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006); Young, *Culture, Class, and Gender*.

[65] M.A. Budd, *The Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire* (Houndsmill: MacMillan, 1997).

inscribed"'.[66] I rely on this valuable groundwork for interpreting many of the sources I will be using. My primary interest, however, is in what Canning terms 'the body as a site of experience.'[67] There has been little focus on the lived experience of embodied class in history, and this study begins to fill this gap. Clearly there is no natural link between the shape of the body and character or behaviour. But representations of the classed male body were not just a figment of the imagination; they were rooted in the experience of difference that people felt and testified to, and they provide evidence of the differences in bodily practices between individuals from different social groups.

The suggestion that social difference was perceived as embodied nuances our knowledge of how Victorians understood themselves and related to others, and represents a new intervention in the long-running arguments about class. Years of historiographical debates have left the definition of class still unresolved, and in the words of two prominent social historians, class has become weighed down by 'a whole collection of definitional and conceptual baggage'.[68] Many histories of the nineteenth century group individuals into three classes, lower, middle and upper, although there are almost as many accounts of the constituent elements of each class as there are histories. Historians seem to have the clearest sense of where the division between the working class and the middle class lay in the nineteenth century: though clearly stratified and complex, the working class has been defined by type of occupation – manual labour – and their marginal economic position. The key arguments have been about how to define the social groups above the working class. What follows is a detailed overview of the historiography of class in order to situate my argument on the embodiment of class within this field.

Most post-war histories have been concerned with the rise of a class-based society and the struggle between classes for political, cultural and economic domination. This historiographical project has largely focused on defining the boundaries of classes, separating each from the other politically, culturally, and economically in order to

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[66] Canning, 'The Body as Method?', 171.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Alan J Kidd and David Nicholls, eds., *The Making of the British Middle Class?: Studies of Regional and Cultural Diversity Since the Eighteenth Century* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), xvi.

identify some coherence within each group.[69] The premise of many of these histories is that underlying economic forces were the cause of social change: classes had different economic interests which meant they had different political concerns, and the outcome of their struggle determined the changing social structure and the nature of political issues at any one time. From the Chartist uprisings through to the unionisation of labour, the idea of class solidarity and struggle emerged in the nineteenth century, and was an important part of social and cultural dynamics.[70] Clearly social groups had different economic and political interests and this is not in dispute here, but this line of historiographical inquiry is of peripheral importance to the argument in this thesis: if Irving was aware of an emerging public discussion about class struggle, he didn't appear to engage politically in it. Nevertheless, these debates have contributed to the multiple meanings and many understandings that we now have of class in the nineteenth century.

The historiography on class in the nineteenth century is further complicated by the diversity of terms used by historians to describe different social groups.[71] This is partly a reflection of the array of terminology and the lack of clarity on the boundaries of social groups used by the historical actors themselves.[72] Comments by Victorians on the structure of their society demonstrate that they had no single agreed definition or vision of it. Matthew Arnold, for example, argued in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) that there were three groups: the aristocracy, the industrial middle class, and the working class. But it is unclear where Arnold positioned himself in these three groups: as a writer, poet and school inspector and the son of the Oxford academic Thomas Arnold, he was clearly no industrialist; but he was not from a landed family either. The lawyer and journalist A.V. Dicey (1835-1922) commented on the blurred lines between the 'upper' and 'middle' classes in *Essays on Reform* (1867): 'Who can say where the upper class ends or where

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[69] Early influential accounts include Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement* (London: Longmans, Green, 1959); E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution. Europe 1789-1848.* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962, 1962); Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society* (London: Routledge, 1971); E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: V. Gollancz, 1963).

[70] See, for example, Dorothy Thompson, *The Early Chartists* (London: Macmillan, 1971); Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Working Class Culture and Working Class Politics in London 1870-1900', *Journal of Social History* 7, no. No.4 (Summer 1974): 460–508; Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London: Routledge, 1989).

[71] Kidd and Nicholls, *The Making*, xxiv–xxv.

[72] Gunn suggests that 'power was marked by a linguistic hiatus or by the process of loose terminological association'. Simon Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority and the English Industrial City, 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 18.

the middle class begins?'[73] And in the same debates leading up to the Second Reform Act the academic G.C. Brodrick (1831-1903) commented: 'What is class but a purely artificial aggregate, which may consist of hundreds, or thousands, or millions, according to the fancy or design of its framer?'[74]

The meanings of words have often been interpreted by historians anachronistically, compounding the problem of the differing conceptions of class: as one historian has put it, 'words, seemingly the most explicit of statements, turn out to be the most deceptive... [The historian's] problem is not just that the terms in use shift over time but that they also shift their meanings and their implications within society at a given moment'.[75] The definition of 'middle class' for example, varied for different people writing at the same time. For the economist Walter Bagehot (1826-1877) the middle classes were 'the ordinary mass of educated, but still commonplace mankind' who were separate from the 'aristocratical' and the 'most educated and refined classes'; whereas for Matthew Arnold the 'middle class' was predominantly industrial and non-conformist.[76] Moreover, class was just one of the many terms which the Victorians used to describe themselves; other terms employed to denote difference included circle, rank, order, degree, station, sort, set and caste, all of which were used throughout the nineteenth century. More significant were the particular prefixes attached to these terminologies which were deployed in specific contexts in order to claim power and deny it to others, including privileged, well-to-do or cultivated as opposed to inferior, unlearned or humble.[77]

Issues over the boundaries and shared aspects of class have been challenged yet further by the epistemological shift in the discipline of history in the 1980s as a result of the impact of postmodern and poststructuralist theories. These histories focused on the

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[73] A.V. Dicey, 'On the Choice of Representatives by Popular Constituencies' in *Essays on Reform* (1867) quoted in David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin, 2000), 96.

[74] Brodrick "The Political Character of the Working Classes" quoted in ibid.

[75] Geoffrey Crossick, 'From Gentleman to Residuum: Languages of Social Description in Victorian Britain', in *Language, History and Class*, ed. P.J. Corfield (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 177.

[76] Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: Fontana, 1993), 248; Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1869).

[77] For the many terms of social description used in the nineteenth century see Crossick, "From Gentleman to Residuum".

analysis of discourses and their power in constituting social and political identities. Historians have argued that representations of class did not correspond in historical fact to social groups on the ground; that there is no causal link between political action and a shared consciousness derived from an individual's involuntary economic position; that social groups are constituted in discourse for political purposes; that class is a linguistic construction and is one of the possible ways in which individuals make sense of themselves and their social world; and that social identity is complex and contingent. With this shift historians increasingly focused on the political and cultural expressions of class without relating them stringently to material interests or a social constituency.[78]

Whilst these cultural histories are useful for considering how ideas about class might have impacted on an individual's understanding of their own identity, a growing number of historians are now questioning the rejection or absence of a consideration of the material in historical analysis. Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, for example, suggest that the most persuasive histories have a two-tier approach combining a material and discursive analysis. They argue that it is crucial to incorporate a poststructuralist approach when analysing the ways in which individuals understood themselves because language generates meanings that have real effects. In their words these effects are 'consciously and unconsciously worked into systems of practice, as well as into the ways of understanding the world and how it works'. But Eley and Nield also question how it is possible for a poststructuralist analysis to explain how people enter the condition of poverty, and that it is important not to deny the 'processes that produce and reproduce

[78] See Gareth Stedman Jones, "Rethinking Chartism," in *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. No.4 (Summer 1991): 773–97; Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); James Vernon, *Politics and the People : A Study in English Political Culture, C. 1815-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). On the debates over materialist and linguistic approaches to class, which raged angrily through the 1990s see David Mayfield and Susan Thorne, "Social History and Its Discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language," *Social History* 17, no. 2 (May 1, 1992): 165–88; Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor, "The Poverty of Protest: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language: A Reply," *Social History* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 1993): 1–15; Patrick Joyce, "The Imaginary Discontents of Social History: A Note of Response to Mayfield and Thorne, and Lawrence and Taylor," *Social History* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 1993): 81–85; James Vernon, "Who's Afraid of the 'Linguistic Turn'? The Politics of Social History and Its Discontents," *Social History* 19, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 81–97; Patrick Joyce, "The End of Social History? A Brief Reply to Eley and Nield," *Social History* 21, no. 1 (January 1, 1996): 96–98; Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, "Starting over: The Present, the Post-Modern and the Moment of Social History," *Social History* 20, no. 3 (October 1, 1995): 355–64. For a useful survey of these debates specifically in relation to the Victorian period see Christopher Kent, "Victorian Social History: Post-Thompson, Post-Foucault, Postmodern," *Victorian Studies* 40, no. 1 (October 1, 1996): 97–133.

poverty as well as those that discursively secure such a condition of being'.[79] In other words both material and cultural aspects have a bearing on people's lives and identities.[80]

Debates on the constituency of the middle class have touched on all of these understandings of and challenges to the meanings and boundaries of class. In the area of class struggle and solidarity, historians have developed the idea of a stratified middle class whose individuals were united against the landed interest and the working class, over different factors. Geoffrey Crossick, for example, differentiated the lower middle class from both the working class and the higher levels of the middle class by type of occupation – the lower middle class were shopkeepers and small businessmen, and white collar workers such as clerks, managers, commercial travellers, school teachers and minor professionals.[81] The higher and lower levels of the middle class were connected, according to Crossick, by their shared belief in the property-owning capitalist economy and its ideology of individualism; but what distinguished the lower middle class was the insecurity of its market position. The nature of lower middle-class occupations, their strident consciousness of middle-class status and belief in personal mobility separated them from the working class. Crossick's definition of the lower middle class therefore situates it as part of, though marginal to, the middle class proper and thus manages to incorporate the variety of occupations, levels of wealth, status and influence between individuals who were neither manual workers nor landowners, with the larger project of the narrative of class struggle.[82] Davidoff and Hall have also argued that the middle class was divided by level of wealth into higher and lower strata; for them the gap was bridged by family and kinship connections, similarities in education, shared reading matter and

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[79] Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 197.

[80] Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 197. Examples of recent nineteenth-century histories of class which take this approach include Vivienne Richmond, *Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Cambridge University, 2013); Nancy W. Ellenberger, *Balfour's World: Aristocracy and Political Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (Martlesham: The Boydell Press, 2015); Julie-Marie Strange, *Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[81] Geoffrey Crossick, ed., *The Lower Middle Class in Britain, 1870-1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1977).

[82] For a summary of the historiography of the lower middle class in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Peter Bailey, 'White Collars, Gray Lives? The Lower Middle Class Revisited', *Journal of British Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 273–90.

religious experiences.[83] In another account R.J. Morris has argued that the middle class was fragmented throughout by economic status, denominational allegiance and political rivalry, and was an elite-led group of merchants, financiers and professionals who were able to unite to protect property interests.[84]

Other historians have separated off the occupational lower middle class from the middle class 'proper'. R.Q. Gray was one of the first social historians to draw the distinction between the 'middle strata' (small business proprietors and white collar workers) and the political 'ruling class' defined in capitalist social formations as 'those who own, or effectively dispose of, economically strategic holdings of capital, together with those (such as the top layer of the professions) linked to them by interest, ideology, and a common mode of life'.[85] Simon Gunn's delineation of 'the middle class' also filters out shopkeepers, white-collar workers and minor professionals. His middle class was not only different from the lower middle class in that its members came from large manufacturing, commercial and professional families, but they also had a greater level of wealth, more influence as leaders in the community, and were better educated. Although Gunn's middle class was fragile because of its distinctions in wealth, religious identity and political affiliation, it was brought together by a shared 'bourgeois' culture in which the household and the public sphere were key sites for its construction, display and reproduction. Importantly, although the middle class was small in number, self-selecting and exclusive, bourgeois culture had a wider currency in society and its dominating influence extended to other social groups, including the lower middle class.[86]

The extent to which the middle class shared cultural, political or economic characteristics has, however, been challenged repeatedly. Questions have been raised, for example, about the extent of the feeling of attachment to the home which still

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[83] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

[84] R. J Morris, *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds 1820-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

[85] R.Q. Gray, "Religion, Culture and Social Class in Late Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Century Edinburgh," in *The Lower Middle Class*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 137. See also R.Q. Gray, "Bourgeois Hegemony in Victorian Britain," in *Papers on Class, Hegemony and Party*, ed. J. Bloomfield (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977).

[86] Gunn, *The Public Culture*.

remains accepted in the historiography as one of the main characteristics of the middle class in the early and mid-Victorian years as a result of the influence of the work of Davidoff and Hall.[87] Some historians have argued that it was not that a profound attachment to the home did not exist for some, but rather that the extent and distinctiveness of this founding aspect of 'middle-class' culture has not been proved.[88] Further, many histories have linked middle class formation to the growth of provincial urban areas, and uncertainty remains about the differences that might exist between the culture of the provincial and the metropolitan middle classes.[89] Others have emphasised more stridently the significance of the local in class relations and argue that there was no uniform picture across provincial and metropolitan locations in which individuals in the middle class might conceive of themselves differently, and in which there was less of a clear delineation within or between classes.[90]

Historians have challenged class boundaries by demonstrating the slippage between the middle and the landed classes. Some have argued that many individuals from the middle class had overlapping economic and cultural interests with individuals from the landed class, and that there was a degree of mutual influence and integration between classes. M.J. Daunton, for example, argues that the interests between City, industry and land were shifting and complex between 1820 and 1914 and that it is not possible to categorise people so neatly into groups in terms of levels of wealth, geography, lifestyle or source of income.[91] F.M.L. Thompson similarly suggests integration between classes, arguing that a new upper class was formed in the second half of the nineteenth century consisting of a newly entrepreneurial landed elite which

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[87] Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*.

[88] For critiques of this influential book see Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (June 1993): 383–414; Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, *Public Lives: Women, Family and Society in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2003).

[89] W. D. Rubinstein, 'Wealth, Elites and the Class Structure of Modern Britain', *Past & Present*, no. 76 (1977): 99–126; Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*.

[90] For an argument that stresses the heterogeneity and significance of local context of the middle class see John Seed, "From 'Middling Sort' to Middle Class in Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century England," in *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification*, ed. M.L. Bush (London: Longman, 1992). See also John Smith, "Urban Elites c.1830-1930 and Urban History," *Urban History* 27, no. 2 (2000); Anthony Howe, *The Cotton Masters 1830-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

[91] M.J. Daunton, '" Gentlemanly Capitalism" and British Industry 1820-1914', *Past & Present*, no. 122 (1989): 119–158.

had proved adaptable in the changing economic and social landscape and had extended its 'aristocratic embrace' to incorporate other elite groups in society.[92] Although the thrust of the arguments of these histories was to challenge the teleology of class struggle, what many of them also clearly indicate is that individuals from a variety of backgrounds, occupations and income levels in the middle and landed classes were operating together in a milieu in which social integration and intermarriage occurred.

Meanwhile, cultural historians have argued for the constructed nature of the middle class. Dror Wahrman, for example, argues that the middle class was not a new social constituency since the 'middling sort', as early modern historians have shown, had been growing in number and significance for some time in England.[93] Rather, it was an invented rhetorical construct that changed in its meanings and deployment over the fifty years of his study from 1780-1830 as and when it was expedient for different political interests. Wahrman is careful in his account to show how representations of the social world were not just random: they were connected to the underlying social process that was transforming Britain, which imposed constraints on the ways in which society could be credibly described and understood; nevertheless, within the 'limits of plausibility' there was 'considerable leeway for contemporaries to choose between divergent – even incompatible – representations of their society'.[94] How certain representations came to be dominant and how they transformed into new representations was largely contingent on the dynamics and effects of politics.[95]

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[92] F.M.L. Thompson, "Britain," in *European Landed Elites in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. David Spring (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1977); F.M.L. Thompson, "English Landed Society," in *The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm*, ed. Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick, and Roderick Floud (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). See also M.L. Bush, *The English Aristocracy : A Comparative Synthesis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); G. S. R Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (London, 1965); Y. Cassis, "Bankers in English Society in the Late Nineteenth Century," *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 38, no. 2 (May 1, 1985): 210–29.

[93] For a summary of these arguments see J. Barry, "The Making of the Middle Class?," *Past & Present*., no. 145 (1994). See also Dror Wahrman, "National Society, Communal Culture: An Argument about the Recent Historiography of Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Social History* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 1992): 43–72; Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[94] Wahrman, *Imagining*, 7.

[95] Wahrman, *Imagining*; Cannadine, *Class in Britain*; S. Gunn, 'Class, Identity and the Urban: The Middle Class in England, c. 1790-1950', *Urban History*. 31, no. 1 (2004).

Clearly historians have been unable to agree on the constituency of the middle class. Indeed as Kidd and Nicholls have aptly commented, 'some historians have been inclined to despair at reaching any satisfactory definition.'[96] Class as embodiment is an alternative way of thinking about the constituency of the middle class, and about society as a whole. In contrast to previous definitions of the middle class ring-fenced by political, cultural or economic lines, it allows for two much more broad and loose groupings in society distinguished by behaviour and bodily practices. The analysis takes the 'socio-cultural' approach suggested by Eley and Nield. On the one hand, the argument acknowledges the power of prevailing ideas on the Victorians' sense of their own identities, contributing to the construction of difference. The historical actors themselves testified to differences in behaviour and provide evidence of their sense of selves in relation to others. But this difference was not merely an effect of language, and therefore the argument also acknowledges the importance of the material in the process of constructing behavioural differences between individuals. It was a learnt behaviour not a natural, essential one, and the foundation for that learnt difference was the social milieu in which the individual was socialised from birth. A family's inability to access material resources for offspring during their childhood played a significant role in this process, although the actual wealth of the family was not necessarily important. Anthony Trollope, the son of an impecunious but highly educated barrister who went bankrupt, received his education at a public school not because his father could afford to pay for it, but rather because his father secured an endowed place for him via his connections.[97] Material resources, therefore, could be latent as well as actual, contingent on family circumstances and networks. Trollope's parents were undoubtedly upper middle-class, and although Trollope's family was often impoverished, he was socialised from his early years amongst the most privileged section of society.

The division between the polite and the vulgar occurred within the middle ranks of Victorian society, and therefore much of the thinking on the constituency of the middle class in previous histories is useful in thinking about these two groups. Vulgar behaviour excluded the less privileged from certain occupations, or at least acted as a glass ceiling. Therefore the division between vulgar and polite broadly maps on to the

[96] Kidd and Nicholls, *The Making*, xxvii.

[97] Trollope, *An Autobiography*.

occupational division between the upper middle class (higher levels of white-collar occupations, professionals, merchants and larger-scale businessmen) and the lower middle class (lower levels of white-collar workers and minor professionals, small-scale business men). However, the complexities of the circumstances of individuals meant that occupation was by no means used as a definitive marker: behaviour and bodily practices were much more indicative to Victorians.

Although historians have acknowledged the difficulty of distinguishing between the upper middle class and the upper class, acknowledging the mutual influence and integration between them, this has not been a prominent feature of discussions about the lower end of the middle class. In the argument here for the division between the polite and the vulgar the lower middle class becomes more closely aligned with the working class than with the upper middle class. Andrew Miles's statistical study of inter-generational social mobility in Victorian society, which uses occupation as a determinant of social position, provides empirical evidence of this. He argues that the main focus of upward mobility was *inside* the occupational stratifications of both the working class and the lower middle class, and *between* the working class and the lower middle class. Inter-generational mobility indicated by the move from lower middle class occupations to those that the upper middle class were more likely to pursue was much less frequent, but did occur.[98] This suggests that the cultural reference points that the lower middle class were most familiar with drew them into a similar social grouping with the working class: their parents and grandparents came from the working and lower middle classes and it was largely amongst these groups that they married.

Despite this, there were clearly shared cultural reference points between the lower middle class and the upper middle class. As Gunn suggests, bourgeois culture had a wider purchase in society.[99] The lower middle class might share the paraphernalia and cultural products of polite society – the possession of certain objects for the home and styles of clothing, habits of theatre- and art-gallery going, the reading of certain

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[98] Andrew Miles, 'How Open Was British Nineteenth Century Society?', in *Building European Society: Occupational Change and Social Mobility in Europe, 1840-1940*, ed. Andrew Miles and David Vincent (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Andrew Miles, *Social Mobility in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).

[99] Gunn, *The Public Culture*.

newspapers and literature; indeed on a daily basis many sat side by side with the most privileged in society on transport and in offices, and operated together in political, religious and associational bodies. The division between polite and vulgar acknowledges this fluid cultural crossover.

In summary, then, I am suggesting that the polite incorporated the non-manual workers and leisured individuals of what has often been termed the upper middle class (or bourgeoisie), the landed gentry and the aristocracy. Polite behaviour and bodily practices united this disparate group of individuals whose differences in terms of levels of wealth, occupation and so on might otherwise distinguish them. The vulgar incorporated all the rest of society: the white-collar and commercial workers of what is often termed the lower middle class (or petit bourgeoisie), and the skilled and non-skilled manual workers of the working class. Similarly, the vulgar were a disparate group of individuals with varying levels of income, education and opportunity, grouped together because of their bodily practices and behaviour.

The polite and the vulgar

In her book *Mixing in Society: A Complete Manual of Manners*, The Right Hon. The Countess of –--- asked, 'How are we to define that unmistakeable something, as subtle as an essence, that makes a gentleman?'[100] In posing this question she was registering a difference that many of her contemporaries sensed between those who commanded the most respect and authority in society and those who didn't. The author believed that that difference was found in the subtleties of behaviour and speech. Without the 'supreme essential' of good manners, she went on, 'what is learning, what are abilities, what are personal attractions, what is wealth?'[101] Gentility was not simply about being rich, clever or talented – all of those things were meaningless if a man dropped his letters when speaking or had a strong regional accent, or if he could not carry himself with an air of 'natural' ease. She was not alone in her views. The author of *Everybody's Business* (1865)

[100] *Mixing in Society*, 38.

[101] Ibid.

was candid in his assessment of the treatment of those with wealth but without manners, and is worth citing at length:

> If he be not in possession of knowledge sufficient to command respect, and if he speak ungrammatically, [he] is not considered a gentleman, though he may fancy himself high in a man's estimation... in our unrighteous faith and hypocrisy, the rich man is courted, feted, and made much of whilst our feet are under his mahogany. Though we may know him to be as uncompanionable, as unintellectual, as uncongenial as a donkey, yet we thrust him into the highest seats in honoured and coveted places, and then he becomes the subject of the scoffer; of ridicule, the gibe – the jest, and food for merriment, when his literary merits are the theme of a discourse.[102]

In this extract the author drew the line between wealth and breeding. The successful man of business could garner attention but not respect from the elite in society; without the learning required to speak or write properly, he would be an object of ridicule. The message from authors of behavioural advice literature of the early and mid-Victorian period was consistent and clear: men without a certain level of refinement commanded limited respect in the highest social circles. Despite cultural ideas circulating in Victorian Britain which asserted that inner character rather than outer refinement was the only significant qualifier to gentility, I will argue that in lived experience those men who exercised the most power in society, who enjoyed the most privileges, who were readily deferred to, who were most able to assert their voices, were those with 'polished' behaviour and speech.

This argument challenges much of the historiography of masculinity in the nineteenth century, which broadly argues that outward behaviour became increasingly irrelevant to male social status between 1750 and 1850. As one of the early historians of masculinity, John Tosh in particular has been influential in embedding this thesis. Tosh argues that the outward 'polish' (what he terms 'gentlemanly politeness') which characterised the eighteenth-century dominant masculine ideal and which was associated with the aristocracy, was increasingly redundant in the nineteenth century as inner moral values, which outwardly manifested in 'manly simplicity' (demonstrations of energy, assertiveness, independence, directness, straightforwardness), became the

[102] Marcus Davis, *Everybody's Business* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co, 1865), 16–17.

dominant masculine ideal. His trajectory of change follows social histories which argue that the process of industrialisation during these years resulted in the rise of a class-based society, and that by the mid nineteenth century the values of the industrial middle class were ascendant. Their creed of manly simplicity, which held that polished manners were of little importance, had become the accepted norm throughout society.[103] The changing economic context was significant in this transformation. The highly competitive conditions of the nineteenth-century marketplace created an individualist ethos that was markedly different from the conditions of the eighteenth century. Politeness had previously been necessary for success because it had been essential to make useful contacts to get on in a society that judged people on the way they behaved and their skills of sociability.[104] In the nineteenth century, in contrast, that success was a solitary effort, and men were judged by the outward demonstration of their inner moral strength. The need to perform in a manner demonstrating a certain level of refinement was therefore unnecessary. As a result, Tosh claims, men socialised with other men less, and instead embraced the private comforts of the home and family in their leisure time. The rise of this bourgeois masculinity meant a partial withdrawal from the public sphere, a contrast all the more striking since it had been such an important site for men in the late eighteenth century.

Tosh's argument seems to be supported by the change in message and tone of behavioural advice literature from the eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century. Until the late eighteenth century the 'courtesy book', whose target readership was the aristocracy and gentry, had dominated the advice literature market. This genre typically combined advice on ideals of character and morality with a discussion of the importance of refined manners and polite conduct in company. By the turn of the century the courtesy book was going out of fashion and was replaced by the 'conduct book'. These writers rejected the superficiality of aristocratic refinement and aimed to

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[103] John Tosh, "Gentlemanly Politeness and Manly Simplicity in Victorian England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, 12 (January 1, 2002): 455–72. Although he later questions the extent of this reach to other classes, particularly the labouring class in John Tosh, "Masculinities in an Industrializing Society: Britain, 1800–1914," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (April 1, 2005): 330–42.

[104] See Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society: Britain 1660-1800* (Harlow: Longman, 2001); Michèle Cohen, "'Manners' Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750–1830," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (April 1, 2005): 312–29. For a useful overview of politeness in the eighteenth century see Lawrence E. Klein, "Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century," *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 4 (December 1, 2002): 869–98.

inspire readers from across society to turn away from the corruptions and temptations of the world by adhering to religious principles. They argued that if the inner character of a man were moral and honest, it would manifest itself in correct outward behaviour; whether that outward behaviour was polished or not was irrelevant. Critical of the surface effect and dissembling nature of aristocratic behaviour, evangelical authors urged people not to conceal their true feelings behind polite but insincere communication but rather to accept their social position in life, to dress simply, and to speak in a way commensurate with their social rank.[105] Although it came to lose much of its religious message, this style of literature remained popular through into the mid-Victorian years, eventually developing into the Smilesian style of 'self-help' literature that maintained the connection between inner moral character and outward behaviour.

Some historians suggest that this change in behavioural advice literature reflected a real change in social behaviour. Michael Curtin has argued that harmony of superficial manners with morals in eighteenth-century courtesy literature makes sense in the context of an era in which financial welfare often rested on securing patronage: the cultivation of a certain kind of outward behaviour became a matter of self-interest. Surface polish was necessary for eighteenth-century men, and therefore politeness was packaged up and branded as worthy for its self-control, restraint and tactfulness. By the early nineteenth century, Curtin argues, the popularity of the courtesy book waned because attitudes started to change. Public opinion became more critical of the landed class in the wake of the French Revolution. The rise of Romanticism with its anti-urban ideas, its rejection of standards of civilisation, and its emphasis on the cultivation of the simple, true self also contributed to these changing attitudes. Furthermore, the transformation in the religious climate with the growth of Evangelicalism influenced shifting attitudes about manners and morals: instead of good manners being valued for their own sake, outward behaviour came to be regarded as evidence of inner moral and religious strength. In this new context, Curtin argues, polished manners were no longer deemed to be an essential element of civilised life, and thus the 'conduct book' superceded courtesy literature, reflecting a real change in behaviour.[106]

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[105] Marjorie Morgan, *Manners, Morals and Class in England, 1774-1858* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994).

[106] Michael Curtin, *Propriety and Position: A Study of Victorian Manners*, Modern European History (New York: Garland, 1987).

I argue, however, that the emergence of another popular style of behavioural advice literature from the 1830s, which focused entirely on the importance of refined manners and speech, raises problems for the argument for this change in male behaviour. Authors of this new type of literature informed readers in no uncertain terms of the *sine qua non* of being taken seriously in Victorian society: the necessity of speaking and carrying oneself in a particular way. The more advanced guides provided advice on the minutiae of drawing room, dining room and ballroom etiquette, the appropriate clothing and conversation for these spheres, and polite conventions of letter writing. Little is known about the authors of these books, as they tended to publish anonymously. It is likely, though, that most of them were from polite society themselves.[107] Authors wrote these books for lower middle-class readers who had risen in wealth during their lifetime but did not know how to behave in order to 'fit in' in higher circles. More basic advice could be found in the columns of journals popular with partially educated, lower middle-class readers such as the *London Journal* and in cheap, ephemeral guides priced from four pence up to two or three shillings. These tended to provide more information on what was regarded as correct pronunciation and accent as well as the "do's and don'ts" of conversation and carriage. Henry Irving as a young man certainly had the profile of a reader of behavioural advice literature, although there is no evidence to suggest that he read any. What we do know, however, is that he had a close relationship in the mid-1860s with James Hain Friswell (1825-1878), a writer whose most successful book *A Gentle Life* was first published in 1864. Although this book was not behavioural advice literature *per se*, it was an intellectual exploration of the definition and characteristics of gentility.[108] Friswell published this book anonymously, but it is possible that he and Irving had discussions about this work.

Historians have argued that this new type of literature was predominantly for a female rather than a male audience. Having manners, Curtin argues, was simply a bonus for the rising new men of the industrial middle class by the mid-Victorian period; politeness was no longer necessary for social advancement because wealthy or talented men would be tolerated by polite society whatever their behaviour. Rather than trying to

[107] Ibid., chapter 3.

[108] James Hain Friswell, *The Gentle Life. Essays in Aid of the Formation of Character*. (London, 1864).

emulate the aristocracy, middle-class men who deliberately learnt politeness were building on their new economic strength by adding an element of social prestige associated with high standards of civilised living. But ultimately, Curtin suggests, their financial success had come not from the facility for making friends aided by social polish, but rather from the self-discipline required to operate skilfully in a market-driven society. Etiquette literature was therefore aimed largely at women, who were excluded from gaining influence and recognition in the marketplace; having social polish and particular skills of sociability gave women a set of tools in order to compete in other ways, such as to attract marriage suitors.[109]

In contrast, I argue that this new genre of advice literature had a strong readership amongst both sexes, and that many aspiring men who wished to command more respect and influence took it seriously. Their own lived experience demonstrated to them that behaviour was critical to their standing amongst other men (and women), and that cultural ideals of manly simplicity did not equate to high social status as it was perceived in reality. My argument concurs with Marjorie Morgan who suggests that the waning of the conduct book and the rise of the etiquette book demonstrates that the ideals of manly simplicity were unrealistic and impractical in the social and economic conditions of the nineteenth century.[110]

Historians have therefore tended to neglect or downplay the significance of gentlemanly politeness in the nineteenth century. Polished self-presentation was far from redundant in the nineteenth century as sociability between men, in public and private spheres, continued to be necessary for building a network of influential contacts for self-advancement. Without contacts a man's career and business success could only go so far, a message that was underscored in advice literature. The author of *How to Shine in Society* (1860), for example, claimed that men without manners frequently experienced 'failure and disappointment' in business when it had seemed almost certain, and 'the disappointed individual looks around him to discover the cause of his failure, but his self-conceit blinds him to the errors of his understanding, while a ridiculous phrase, or

[109] Curtin, *Propriety and Position*.

[110] Morgan, *Manners*.

an ill-placed or incongruous reflection has sufficed perhaps to do it all.'[111] The surface polish of gentlemanly politeness enhanced an individual's capacity to build an influential network: it inspired belief in his authority and ability, and trust in his creditworthiness. Furthermore, acquiring gentlemanly politeness was absolutely crucial to upward social mobility. Success in business might enable a man to move up economically, but without refined speech and behaviour he would hit the proverbial 'glass ceiling' socially: his access to certain social circles would be severely hampered, as would the extent of the respect and authority he could command from others in society. These aspects of masculine behaviour were the most significant to Victorian perceptions of social status, as I will demonstrate with Irving's experiences in chapter five.

Historians of masculinity in recent years increasingly support this challenge to the shift in hegemonic masculine ideals and behaviour from 1750 to 1850. Some have questioned the extent to which the desire for independence, which was such a significant aspect of manliness, was specifically a nineteenth-century ideal.[112] Others have questioned the implausibility of the seemingly whiggish shifts in masculine identity from one era to the next which appear to reinforce a long-discredited picture of the rise of 'modern' man; furthermore, specific characteristics of hegemonic masculinity claimed for certain periods echo chronologies in other fields of history which, coupled together, do not project a coherent story over the longue durée.[113] Furthermore, the shift follows social histories that argue that by the middle of the nineteenth century the values of the industrial middle class were ascendant in society, a narrative historians have questioned.

Hundreds of behavioural advice texts from the 1830s attempted to explain the essential elements of politeness to aspiring men and women. Authors declaring their expertise provided practical guidance to readers trying to bridge a knowledge gap in speech and behaviour that many felt held them back publicly, professionally and socially.

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[111] *How to Shine in Society, or The Art of Conversation, Etc.* (Glasgow, 1860), 9–10.

[112] H. French and M. Rothery, '"Upon Your Entry into the World": Masculine Values and the Threshold of Adulthood among Landed Elites in England 1680-1800', *Social History* 33, no. 4 (2008).

[113] See Alexandra Shepard, "From Anxious Patriarchs to Refined Gentlemen? Manhood in Britain, circa 1500–1700," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (April 1, 2005): 281–95; J. Gregory, "Homo Religious: Masculinity and Religion in the Long Eighteenth Century," in *English Masculinities, 1660-1800,* ed. M. Cohen and T. Hitchcock (London: Longman, 1999); W. Stafford, "Gentlemanly Masculinities as Represented by the Late Georgian Gentleman's Magazine," *History* 93, no. 309 (2008).

Advice writers discerned a divide in society into two groups distinguished by behaviour and bodily practices. The terms most frequently used to describe these two groups were the polite and the vulgar, and both had a set of associated vocabulary that recurred throughout these texts. The polite operated in 'Polite society' or 'Good society' and demonstrated 'politeness' or 'good manners'; they were 'well-educated' and 'intellectual', 'well-bred' or had 'good breeding', were 'refined' or demonstrated 'refinement' in their behaviour, were 'cultivated' and 'civilised', had 'polish' and 'suavity', they were 'gentlemen' and had 'gentle' manners and habits. The vulgar on the other hand were otherwise known as the 'hoi polloi' or the 'Million'; they operated with 'vulgarity' or in a 'vulgar manner'; they were 'uneducated' or 'half-educated', 'ill-bred', 'half-bred', 'semi-cultivated', 'plebeian', 'coarse', 'ignorant', 'common', 'unpolished', 'uncivilised', and 'genteel'.

Historians have tended to dismiss behavioural advice literature as a credible depiction of the realities of behaviour because of its prescriptive, dogmatic and sometimes trivial tone.[114] Furthermore, discrepancies in the details of etiquette across advice literature have contributed to the scepticism of the reliability of these sources. However, these discrepancies can be attributed to changing fashions and differences between polite circles, and illuminate the fact that there was no single set of rules for polite behaviour. Advice writers understood that heterogeneity inevitably existed, and pointed out that even men from polite backgrounds occasionally slipped up in their speech, conversation and bearing. The essential thing was that the performance of the whole had to be convincing. I use advice literature in this argument therefore to demonstrate prevailing attitudes to social difference and as a guide to the broad brush-strokes of politeness, rather than to measure to what extent prescriptive texts were an accurate reflection of practice.

Many authors found it challenging to describe in words the nature of that nebulous 'something', the nuances of tone and carriage that gave some men a certain air of confidence and 'ease' which made their gentility convincing. There is an insistence in

[114] Jay Mechling, 'Advice to Historians on Advice to Mothers', *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 44–63; Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

advice literature that this ease and confidence came naturally to the polite – and those wishing to 'pass' as gentlemen should endeavour to make their behaviour appear innate and unstudied. These sources therefore point to prevailing ideas in Victorian society that behaviour was 'natural' rather than conditioned. But as I will demonstrate in the rest of this thesis, the cultural differences between the polite and the vulgar were based on years of socialisation.

The first major element of politeness was speech. Since the mid eighteenth century public consciousness of standards of speech had been gradually increasing, so that by the mid nineteenth century spoken communication had come to have even more social significance in determining the way that people regarded each other.[115] Stereotypes about personality traits, levels of intelligence and moral values came to be associated with speech, and accent and enunciation instantly indicated social background and status. The process of establishing a standard took time to create and consolidate, but the expansion of the press in the nineteenth century sped up this process as the message about the importance of correct speech was repeated in journals, dictionaries and advice literature. Popular novels also served to underscore perceptions of speech and social position through writing conventions deployed to represent the language of working men and women, which contrasted starkly with the language of their educated 'superiors'.

Advice writers insisted that in order to be accepted in polite society, it was absolutely essential to enunciate correctly – no man would be taken seriously without this. Rules for the correct placement and clear, precise, distinct utterance of sounds and letters were established as the 'pure' and proper way of speaking, and were linked to education and cultural refinement. Correct pronunciation was the difference, according to the author of *Art of Elocution* (1846), which distinguished the 'educated gentleman from the vulgar and unpolished man.'[116] Dropping letters from the beginning and end of words was high on the hit list of bad pronunciation, as the author of *Talking and Debating* (1856) made clear to his readers:

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[115] Lynda Mugglestone, *Talking Proper: The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

[116] George Vandenhoff, *The Art of Elocution* (London, 1846), 51.

> The easy distinctness observable in the utterance of a refined person, offers a striking contrast to the drawling and hurried style of one untaught. In the speech of the latter the words have no corners, the consonants glide one into the other, and many of the words get attached together, as, for instance, 'Twas a nour afterwards th' the boat upset and before w'ad time t'aul in or see 'ow far'off the shore was so th'twen we found ourselves adrift, &c, &c.' A neat speaker would say 'An hour afterwards, and before we had time to judge what was our distance from the shore, or to haul in the canvas, the boat upset; and then, finding ourselves adrift, &c, &c.[117]

Here the author underscores the difference in education between the language of the polite – the 'refined person' – and the language of the vulgar – the 'untaught'. The style of delivery as well as the pronunciation is different: the vulgar person is 'drawling and hurried' whereas the polite man is 'neat'. Furthermore, the distinction between the two could not be more pronounced in its 'striking contrast'.

Scores of elocution guides were published in the 1850s when Irving was a teenager, many of them in the *Sixpenny Library* series, preaching against the misdemeanours of dropping letters and mispronouncing words, and advising on the 'correct' pronunciation of long lists of vocabulary. Popular guides aimed at the vulgar included titles such as *Walker's Pronouncing Dictionary* (1857), *P's and Q's: Grammatical Hints for the Millions* (1855), *Hard Words Made Easy: Rules for Accent and Pronunciation* (1855) and *Common Blunders made in Speaking and Writing* (1856). The Hon Henry H's particular bugbear was the abuse that 'Poor Letter H and his brother vowels' were subject to, and he informed readers who were 'ignorantly and wrongly elevating or depressing the proper aspirations' that they were the butt of mirth or compassion in polite company.[118]

Grammatical accuracy in speech was also important; without it, one author claimed, a man had 'no foundation, no corner-stone on which the superstructure is

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[117] *Talking and Debating: Or, Fluency of Speech Attained Without the Sacrifice of Elegance and Sense* (London, 1856), 15.

[118] Hon Henry H., *P's and Q's in Writing and Speaking: Or, Grammatical Hints for the Million.* (London, 1855), 6.

dependent'.[119] Judgement about social position and level of education from wildly inaccurate grammar was instant and was likely to result in exclusion from polite circles, as the author of *Everybody's Business* (1865) explained to readers: '"He is a common man – quite uneducated. He scarcely speaks a sentence correctly". These are the terms applied to men who may perhaps be possessed of a fund of general information: yet being deficient in the knowledge of the modes and rules of speaking grammatically, are pronounced... as not presentable in society'.[120] In reality, there was a difference between precept and practice, as some writers admitted: highly educated men were not always letter perfect, and could err slightly in their grammar.[121] The key was to make sure those mistakes were not too glaring, and that the overall performance of politeness was persuasive.

Another indication of vulgarity was the presence of a strong regional accent and the use of local dialect or provincialisms in speech. In the mid eighteenth century regional accents had not been an immediate indicator of social position, but this had changed by the middle of the nineteenth century. Despite the claim by the author of *How to Shine in Society* (1860) that the 'pure' accent of the educated gentleman belongs to 'no city or district', in fact the accent of the metropolitan elite had by the mid-Victorian years come to be regarded as the accent-less standard.[122] Men with soft traces of a provincial accent, particularly Scottish and Irish, were not necessarily condemned in polite circles, but those who had coarse accents, used slang or cockneyisms, immediately indicated to others that they were not gentlemen. For those who were not 'well-born' having accent-less speech provided an easier passage into polite society and commanded more immediate and unquestioning respect, as the author of *Talking and Debating* (1856) pointed out: 'A proper accent gives importance to what you say, engages the respectful attention of your hearer, and is your passport to new circles of acquaintance'.[123]

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[119] Davis, *Everybody's Business*, 22.

[120] Ibid.

[121] See for example the preface to *Live and Learn: A Guide for All Who Wish to Speak and Write Correctly.* (London, 1855).

[122] *How to Shine in Society, or the Art of Conversation, Etc.*, 20. For the development of the metropolitan 'accentless' standard see Mugglestone, *Talking Proper*.

[123] *Talking and Debating*, 15.

Authors of advice literature suggested that it was not just enunciation, grammatical accuracy and accent that indicated politeness or vulgarity, but also the way in which the voice was regulated and inflected, and the manner in which words were delivered. In everyday conversation the polite man's voice had to be low, musical, well-modulated and controlled in contrast to the blustering, boisterous, impetuous, loud, monotonous, abrasive, uncontrolled voice of the vulgar man.[124] The voice was a musical instrument, an organ which,

> with its bellows, its pipe, its mouth-piece needed to be learnt, and when we know the stops it will discourse most eloquent music. It has its gamut, or scale of ascent and descent; it has its keys, or pitch, - its tones, - its semi-tones, its bass, its tenor, its alt – its melody, its cadence.[125]

The author of *Etiquette for Gentlemen* (1856) advised that when conversing in the drawing room, 'tone of voice should invariably be gentle and subdued, not affected, but not unrestrained – a little under the natural key.'[126] Another author believed the voice should not be loud, and particularly advised on bodily control when speaking: 'the speech should not be accompanied by gesticulation, and the features should ever be under strict control.'[127] Politeness was all about maintaining discipline in the mode and manner of speaking. Only the vulgar could not control their bodies, as the author of *How to Shine in Society* made clear in relation to laughter:

> Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill-manners: it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things; and they call it being merry. In our mind, there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred, as audible laughter... not to mention the disagreeable noise it makes, and the shocking distortions of the face that it occasions.'[128]

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[124] Similar 'rules' existed for women. See Mugglestone, *Talking Proper*, chap. 5.

[125] Vandenhoff, *The Art of Elocution*, 75.

[126] *Etiquette for Gentlemen: With Hints on the Art of Conversation.* (London: David Bogue, 1856), 61.

[127] *Mixing in Society*, 91.

[128] *How to Shine*, 47.

The difference between the higher and lower classes is again strongly contrasted here through the description of bodily practices: excessive noise and distortions of the body and facial features were regarded as vulgar.

Politeness was not just about how a man spoke, but also what he talked about, and his manner in conversation. Writers pointed to the crucial and influential role of conversation in polite circles. One author suggested:

> It is impossible to deny the influence of conversation in almost all human affairs. It is that which decides the fortunes of the great portion of society, and has altered the views, and retarded or promoted the hopes of many a one, little observant of the unseen influence which has hewn his destiny.[129]

Being able to converse well was a highly valued skill, and was considered to be a marker of distinction from the vulgar – it demonstrated intellectual training and cultural refinement. 'The great business in company is conversation. It should be studied as an art,' declared one author.[130] 'He who would shine in society, must read a great deal; and, to be able to transmit his ideas to others in conversation, he must think as hard as he reads,' said another.

The vast amount of words in behavioural advice literature devoted to appropriate and inappropriate topics of conversation is testament to the importance that the Victorians placed on it. Chapter three examines the education of the polite and the vulgar in more detail, but it is clear that appropriate topics required a level of education that was beyond the majority of the population. Nature, history, biography, science, art, music and literature were staple subjects: these were regarded as 'general knowledge', and were requisite: 'anyone attempting to converse in good society without possessing, at least, the elements of general knowledge, must soon stumble and go wrong'.[131] To converse really well required more than just superficial details of these subjects, but above all it was important to have even 'the merest smattering' in order to avoid looking

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[129] Ibid., 9.

[130] *Etiquette for Gentlemen*, 42.

[131] *Talking and Debating*, 7.

foolish.[132] For the Countess of --- it was important to be able to express oneself clearly and correctly, but without some level of knowledge gained through a good education, there was no point in talking about the nuances of accent.[133] The vulgar man's conversation showed no sign of learning, and was petty in its subject matter, savouring strongly, as one author contemptuously put it, of 'the lowness of his education and company. It turns chiefly upon his domestic affairs, his servants, the excellent order he keeps in his own family, and the little anecdotes of the neighbourhood, all of which he relates with emphasis, as interesting matters.'[134]

Authors encouraged men to work hard at perfecting their skills of conversation. Getting the balance right was important. It was as essential not to be perceived as a know-it-all as it was to demonstrate sufficient levels of knowledge: introducing complex ideas, technical terms, or 'hard words' into general conversation was regarded as pedantic.[135] Simple and terse language was demonstrative of the well-educated man, and it was only the 'half-educated who indulge in fine language, and think that long words and high-sounding phrases are distingué.'[136] It was also important not to skip rapidly from topic to topic, as this showed a 'disorderly mind'; but at the same time, long stories tested patience.[137] Rather, the desired behaviour was to keep the conversation going continuously and pleasantly in order to avoid awkwardness. This included avoiding certain topics: politics and religion, for example, which had the potential to excite passion or offence, were regarded as inappropriate. Talk about scandal was vulgar, as was any form of flattery that might be perceived as demonstrating a sense of inferiority.

Politeness was also demonstrated in the way a man conducted himself during conversation. Again, restraint and self-possession, or 'gentlemanly reserve', were the keynotes. Listening patiently to others, whether they were interesting or not, was an important rule in the dynamics of conversation: cutting in or showing anxiety to speak

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[132] Ibid.

[133] *Mixing in Society*, 89.

[134] *How to Shine*, 47.

[135] *Talking and Debating*, 11; *Mixing in Society*, 92.

[136] *Mixing in Society*, 237.

[137] *Talking and Debating*, 14.

was considered 'obnoxious' and distinguished 'the man of refinement from the real bore'.[138] The ability to draw out good speakers was a great skill, and those who were able to give the floor to worthy others when they had little to say on an interesting subject, who were able to 'construct a thread on which wiser men may hang their several beads of wisdom', were a 'valuable auxiliary to any conversational party'.[139] It was also important not to show any annoyance or personal rancour with anything one's companion was saying: taking offence or feeling slighted was a sure sign of inferiority and vulgarity.[140] Indeed polite men were distinguished by their affability. Authors found it difficult to describe to readers how to be affable in conversation. One author expressed it as a charm 'not so easily described as felt. It is the compound result of different things: a complaisance, a flexibility, but not a servility of manner: an air of softness in the countenance, gesture and expression; equally whether you concur or differ with the person you converse with.'[141]

Despite the strictures presented in much behavioural advice literature, authors were often realistic about the flexibility of following 'rules' to the letter. One suggested that most etiquette writers gave too little or too much detail and that they quickly became out of date as fashions changed. They attempted instead to provide more generic rules and observations about polite society that were of 'an enduring kind'.[142] Another suggested that behaviour in polite society in reality was flexible to a degree and that rigidly following a set of rules in fact had detrimental effects on smooth interaction: 'The frost of fashion may soon freeze up all genuine hilarity and kindness, if in our endeavours to improve the habits of speech and action, we allow forms and rules to have too much influence.'[143]

Rather, successful social interaction depended on a certain easiness of manner and on hitting the right 'tone': 'Everything depends upon the tone, the tone of voice, the

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[138] Ibid., 5.

[139] Ibid., 11.

[140] *How to Shine*, 46.

[141] *Talking and Debating*, 14.

[142] *Guide to English Etiquette, with the Rules of Polite Society for Ladies and Gentlemen. By an English Lady and Gentleman.* (London, 1844), preface.

[143] *Talking and Debating*, 18.

tone of manner.'[144] This assessment of the realities of social interaction in polite society concurs with evidence from other contemporary sources. Literary historian Lynda Mugglestone argues that the use of language remained heterogeneous because of the multidimensional nature of society despite the drive, through dictionaries and advice literature, to establish uniformity over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[145] By the 1850s, when younger members of the provincial aristocracy and gentry were increasingly starting to conform to the 'accent-less' London accent, older members were more easily forgiven for having stronger provincial accents since it only started to become accepted as the norm by the middle of the century. Advice writers acknowledged this diversity in the use of language. The author of *Live and Learn*, for example, was frank in his admission that correct speaking did not just come as a matter of course even for those who were born into polite society and had received the best education.[146]

Getting the technicalities exactly right, therefore, was not what made a polite man. Rather, it was about getting enough of it right, having a familiarity with what to do and say in any situation – and, more importantly, having an easiness of manner, a certain assurance and self-possession, an unquestioning assumption of belonging in polite society. Advice writers were in unison about the importance of this easiness of manner. The author of *Mixing in Society* repeatedly discussed it:

> A man may know as many languages as Mezzofanti, may have made scientific discoveries greater than those of Herschel or Darwin, may be as rich as a Rothschild, as brave as a Napier, yet if he has a habit of hesitating over his words, of twisting his limbs, of twiddling his thumbs, of laughing boisterously, of doing or saying awkward trifles, of what account is he in society?[147]

Awkwardness of attitude and speech was a signal to others that a man didn't quite belong; what the author called an 'air of gaucherie' had the effect to 'take off a certain

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[144] Ibid., 18.

[145] See Mugglestone, *Talking Proper*, 44–9.

[146] *Live and Learn*, preface.

[147] *Mixing in Society*, 38–39.

percentage from the respect of others'.[148] Rolling out the technicalities of polite manners – being able to bow gracefully and so on – came across as artificial if they were not accompanied by that element of ease which authors found so difficult to describe. One author, struggling to define it, referred to ease as 'that delightful graciousness of manner, which, in the every-day intercourse of life, is the peculiar and distinguishing attribute of high breeding; it is a charm that can hardly be described, though it can be felt.'[149] The contradictory idea of what was 'natural' is here highlighted in the double meaning of the term 'high breeding', which suggests that the Victorians believed that manners came as an 'attribute' of social origins as a matter of course, but also that they were learnt.

For those from lower middle- and working-class backgrounds, therefore, learning to speak 'properly' was essential to becoming part of polite society but it counted for little without that 'unmistakeable something, as subtle as an essence' which the Victorians called 'ease' – a sense of assurance, a self-possession visible in gesture, carriage and conversation. Authors claimed that people quickly noticed those who felt out of place. The vulgar man gave himself away by his demeanour and carriage: 'Ashamed and confused, the awkward man sits in his chair stiff and bolt upright; whereas the man of fashion is easy in every position; instead of lolling or lounging as he sits, he leans with elegance, and, by varying his attitudes, shows that he has been used to good company.'[150] Another writer provided an imaginary scenario in which this elusive quality of ease is contrasted with awkwardness:

> In the club the gentleman entered quietly, greeted acquaintances with an easy nod, and, in general, took his place without disturbance. In contrast, a 'would-be man of the world' was uncertain of quite what was expected of him, even though hardly anything was. He nervously hands his stick to the waiter, and drops into the first convenient chair, whence he rarely ventures to look around and speak.[151]

Very few authors attempted to put into words what easiness was but instead referred to it in the general terms of being 'quiet', 'manly', 'free' and 'graceful' as opposed to 'stiff',

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[148] Ibid., 238.

[149] *Guide to English Etiquette*, 99.

[150] *The Young Man's Own Book; a Manual of Politeness, Intellectual Improvement, and Moral Deportment.* (Halifax, 1837), 212.

[151] *How to Behave or, The Etiquette of Society* [n.d.] cited in Curtin, *Propriety and Position*, 111.

'gauche' and 'awkward'. Some, however, attempted to describe how parts of the body should be positioned. One author advised readers to acquire

> a method of bending the arms, so that they may repose a little forward, and so as to admit of the hands being easily clasped: one leg should be straight, -- the knee of the other slightly bent out; the body erect; the neck in its place; the head poised freely, without stiffness; and the countenance expressing mildness and candour.[152]

This injunction for bodily control to look natural and unlearnt underscored again the prevailing attitude that gentility was an innate quality, despite this description demonstrating it to be carefully fashioned.

Contextualising Irving's multiple public identities

This final section of the chapter examines the emergence and meanings of self-making, eccentricity and bohemianism, three cultural ideas circulating in Victorian society that Irving publicly identified with in order to support his social position. These cultural themes emerge during Irving's childhood, adolescence and early career, as I demonstrate in later chapters, and it is therefore necessary to provide some context for them at the start of the thesis.

Self-making suggested that any man could rise from 'humble' origins to achieve social equality with the most privileged through diligence, self-improvement and thrift. It had an intellectual lineage dating back to eighteenth-century Enlightenment concepts about the development of the rational individual.[153] Self-making was complex and shifted with economic and social change, and over time distinct constituencies deployed the

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[152] *True Politeness for Ladies and Gentlemen* (London, 1853), 7. See also George Vandenhoff, *The Art of Elocution* (London, 1846), 207–9 for another attempt to describe easiness.

[153] T. H. E. Travers, 'Samuel Smiles and the Origins of "Self-Help": Reform and the New Enlightenment', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 9, no. 2 (1 July 1977): 161–87; Kenneth Fielden, 'Samuel Smiles and Self-Help', *Victorian Studies* 12, no. 2 (1 December 1968): 155–76.

rhetoric of self-making for their different political agendas.[154] It gathered force in the context of the debates over laissez-faire and voluntaryism versus responsible government and state intervention from the 1830s, and by the 1850s the idea behind the maxim 'what some men are, all might without difficulty be' was an important strand of the mid-Victorian liberal credo.[155] By the 1880s another set of ideas had emerged in Britain about the socio-biological degeneration of society, which questioned the wisdom of the move towards mass democracy and the value of socialism, and provided some elite Victorian thinkers with a renewed rational for classical liberalism.[156] Education was a crucial part of self-making. Young men from the working and lower middle classes with limited education studied together in mutual improvement groups, or attended institutes set up to enable self-improvement.[157] Investing in voluntary associations was also an important aspect of self-making, which encouraged people to save for a rainy day.[158]

'Self-making' literature started to emerge in the early nineteenth century, and Evangelical Christian ideas suggesting that God would help those who helped themselves influenced the tone of much of this literature.[159] One of the most popular advocates of self-making was the writer Samuel Smiles (1812-1904), who argued in *Self-Help* (1859) that it was possible for any man to rise from low social origins to achieve high status through hard work, discipline, self-cultivation and thrift. No special genius was required – every man could achieve material and social rewards through perseverance. Smiles was not the source of the idea of the self-made man – a number of authors had been articulating similar ideas since at least the 1830s. But Smiles certainly contributed to the popularisation of the credo of self-making through a number of self-help-style books

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[154] Richard N. Price, 'The Working Men's Club Movement and Victorian Social Reform Ideology', *Victorian Studies* 15, no. 2 (1 December 1971): 117–47; R. J. Morris, 'Samuel Smiles and the Genesis of Self-Help: The Retreat to a Petit Bourgeois Utopia', *The Historical Journal* 24, no. 1 (1 March 1981): 89–109.

[155] Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 245.

[156] Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, 1848-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 153–221.

[157] J. F. C Harrison, *Learning and Living 1790-1960: A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961); Edward Royle, 'Mechanics' Institutes and the Working Classes, 1840-1860', *The Historical Journal* 14, no. 2 (1971): 305–21.

[158] P.H. Gosden, *Self-Help: Voluntary Associations in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Batsford, 1973).

[159] Asa Briggs, *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes, 1851-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

aimed at working and lower-middle class readers.[160] Self-Help was a huge publishing success: twenty thousand copies were sold in the first year alone.[161] The theme of self-making was also visible in books and magazines intended for lower middle-class readers.[162] A profusion of literature existed by the 1850s, when Irving was a teenager and at a time when he was arguably most susceptible to ideas of self-help.

The idea that rewards would come from hard work and good moral conduct ran through the literature of success, as it did in other Victorian cultural sources. Two of the most influential Victorian writers, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) and John Ruskin (1819-1900), for example, argued for the central importance of hard work in life.[163] For the political economist Walter Bagehot (1826-1877) inequalities would always arise in society due to differences in people's level of industry: 'in time, wealth grows and inequality begins. A and his children are industrious and prosper; B and his children are idle and fail'.[164] Acknowledging the potential for social mobility from 'wholesome competition', Bagehot praised the English social system, which he claimed had 'removable inequalities, where many people are inferior to and worse off than others, but in which each may in theory hope to be on a level with the highest below the throne'.[165] Bagehot was careful to mention the theoretical aspect of achieving equality with those at the highest level: not everyone would make it, but the potential existed, with competition and effort. Prime Minister Lord Palmerston (1784-1865) shared a similar view. In a speech given to artisans and working men at the prize-giving of the South London Industrial Exhibition in 1865, he praised the English constitution for allowing talented men to rise socially with hard work:

> Does the aristocracy of rank in this country consist simply of those who can count in their pedigree generations of noble ancestors? Look at all the great men who

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[160] Samuel Smiles, *Character* (London: John Murray, 1871); Samuel Smiles, *Thrift* (London: John Murray, 1875); Samuel Smiles, *Duty* (London: John Murray, 1880).

[161] Briggs, *Victorian People*, 125–26.

[162] For a list of titles see J. F. C. Harrison, 'The Victorian Gospel of Success', *Victorian Studies* 1, no. 2 (1 December 1957): 155–64.

[163] Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1843); John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (London, 1851).

[164] Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, 247.

[165] Walter Bagehot, 'Sterne and Thackeray' (1864) quoted in Briggs, *Victorian People*, 98.

> have figured in public life. Look at your Army, your Navy, your Law, your Church, your statesmen. You will find in every one of those careers men who have risen to the highest points, who have either themselves started from the smallest beginnings, or whose fathers began with nothing but their talents, their industry, and their energy to aid them.[166]

The realities of social mobility were much more limited than these accounts suggested. Palmerston and Bagehot used the idea of self-making for political persuasion at a time in the mid 1860s when Parliament was debating the extension of the franchise: they both wanted the system to remain unchanged.

Self-making was an example of the usage of political vocabulary which Gareth Stedman Jones identified in his study of the language of Chartism: 'To be successful, that is, to embed itself in the assumptions of masses of people, a particular political vocabulary must convey a practicable hope of a general alternative and a believable means of realising it, such that potential recruits can think within its terms.'[167] The narrative of self-making crucially enabled people to imagine themselves differently, however limited their prospects were in reality. Examples of historical figures who had risen socially littered self-making literature and provided figureheads for aspiring young men. The idea of the self-made man provided an imagined possibility in which material and cultural barriers could be overcome, even if the odds were stacked against that end. Irving came from a background steeped in the culture of self-making, and as I argue in later chapters, it enabled him to imagine a different life for himself.

Self-making literature also strongly suggested that individual effort to self-improvement was indicative of a good and moral character. A virtuous 'character' began to be cited as the defining feature of gentility, as ideas about gentility shifted in public discussion from outward polished appearances to strength of inner moral 'character' in the early nineteenth century. Smiles, for example, claimed that any man who was independent and who conducted himself with respectability and honour, despite his social origins, was a gentleman:

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[166] *Illustrated London News*, 8 April 1865 quoted in Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain: 1851-75* (Fontana, 1985), 256–57.

[167] Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', 96.

> Riches and rank have no necessary connection with genuine gentlemanly qualities. The poor man may be a true gentleman – in spirit and daily life. He may be honest, truthful, upright, polite, temperate, courageous, self-respecting and self-helping – that is, be a true gentleman.[168]

Authors suggested that 'nature's gentlemen' were to be found throughout the ranks of society. Men from humble social origins with virtuous characters featured frequently in mid-Victorian novels such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), George Meredith's *Evan Harrington* (1861) and George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866). Dinah Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), published in the year Irving turned eighteen, was one of the most popular of these novels. John Halifax was the archetypal self-made man: a ragged but honest orphan who wanted to improve himself. He worked diligently during the day, read books by night, and eventually rose up in society.

These idealistic claims about self-making and 'nature's gentlemen' were challenged in Victorian society, although it was a somewhat uncomfortable acknowledgement. Social commentators, politicians, academics and churchmen also publicly debated the definition of a gentleman.[169] Commenting on the new policy of competitive entrance exams into the Civil Service in his autobiography, Anthony Trollope was unusually candid about class difference:

> There are places in life which can hardly be well filled except by 'Gentlemen'. The word is one the use of which almost subjects one to ignominy. If I say that a judge should be a gentleman, or a bishop, I am met with scornful allusion to 'Nature's Gentlemen'… It may be that the son of a butcher of the village shall become as well fitted for employments requiring gentle culture as the son of the parson. Such is often the case. When such is the case, no one has been more prone to give the butcher's son all the welcome he has merited than I myself; but the

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[168] Smiles, *Self-Help*, 327–28.

[169] On the changing and contradictory definitions of the gentleman see Penny Corfield, "The Rivals: Landed and Other Gentlemen," in *Land and Society in Britain 1700-1914: Essays in Honour of F.M.L. Thompson*, ed. Negley Harte and Roland Quinault (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); David Castronovo, *The English Gentleman: Images and Ideals in Literature and Society* (New York: Ungar, 1987); Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981); Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven: Yale, 1981); Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain: 1851-75* (Fontana, 1985); David Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture : Perceptions and Introspections in an Age of Change* (London: John Murray, 1997); Asa Briggs, *Victorian People: Some Reassessments of People, Institutions, Ideas and Events, 1851-1867* (London: Odhams Press, 1954).

> chances are greatly in favour of the parson's son. The gates of the one class should be open to the other; but neither to the one class nor to the other can good be done by declaring that there are no gates, no barrier, no difference.[170]

Although Trollope was not opposed to the idea of meritocracy, he rejected the suggestion that there was no difference between the gentleman-by-birth and the Smilesian 'Nature's Gentlemen'. Trollope acknowledged, and rightly so, that opportunities for the majority were not equal to those who came from what he called 'gentle culture'.[171]

Anxieties about pretensions to gentility surfaced frequently in public discussion, demonstrating the profound unease that many Victorians felt about social mobility from the lower to the upper ranks of society. Class prejudice appeared as concern for the imposture of gentility. In literature and drama the aspiring lower middle-class man was often represented as a deceitful and false character pretending to be a gentleman. Trollope's novels, and many others from the Victorian period are filled with male characters whose vulgarities are distinguished from the behaviour of 'real' gentlemen. The rising prosperity of some members of the lower classes enabled them increasingly to challenge traditional markers of class such as dress and household consumption. Instinctive mutual recognition of 'authentic' gentility became a prominent motif in literary sources. Disdain for 'new wealth' indicated the contempt many of the polite felt for the 'upstarts' attempting to suggest gentility through their material possessions. Characters aping gentility through accent, dress, etiquette or household display, were often presented as figures of ridicule. One of the most famous examples was Dickens' character Horatio Sparkins in *Sketches by Boz* (1836), who dupes the lower middle-class Malderton family into believing he is a gentleman. The vulgar Maldertons later discover him working as a shop assistant in a linen-drapery. The imitation of gentility is ridiculed again in *The Natural History of the Gent* (1847) in which the author Albert Smith distinguished the vulgar 'gent' from the polite 'gentleman'. The gent is characterised as 'of all others the most unbearable, principally from an assumption of style about him – a

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[170] Trollope, *An Autobiography*, 39–40.

[171] On the complexities and contradictions of Trollope's views on innate and performed distinctions of class see Kevin R. Swafford, 'Performance Anxiety, or the Production of Class in Anthony Trollope's "The Claverings"', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 38, no. 2 (2005): 45–58.

futile aping of superiority that inspires us with feelings of mingled contempt and amusement, when we contemplate his ridiculous pretensions to be considered 'the thing'.[172] In his ridicule of the 'gent', Smith implied that pretensions to gentility were always visible. This again suggested the view that behaviour was natural rather than learnt:

> The Gent… copies the gentleman, but sees, as usual, every thing through a wrong medium. In fact, his reflection is that of a spoon, in more senses than one: making the most outrageous images of the original, distorting all the features, but still preserving a strange sort of identity.[173]

This exaggeration of gentility as a marker of a deceitful character continued to be a literary trope throughout the nineteenth century. In Henry James's short story *The Liar* (1889), for example, the villainous character Colonel Capadose is described in such terms: 'what was odd in him was a certain mixture of the correct and the extravagant, as though he was imitating a gentleman'.[174]

Imposters of gentility were also depicted as figures of danger or bad moral character in storylines that centred on marriage, indicating a fascination with the transgression of crossing class boundaries. In Wilkie Collins' novel *Basil* (1852) the linen-draper Mr Sherwin, for example, attempted to present himself as a gentleman through his domestic abode and manners; but it was clear to Basil, who came from a long-established landed family, that the unpleasant Sherwin, whose daughter he wanted to marry, was not his social equal. The figure of Sherwin, an imposter of gentility, acted as a warning sign that Basil foolishly did not heed.

Social mobility was frequently represented simultaneously as a threat as well as an asset to society, and elite Victorians often saw no contradiction in combining the two ideas. Theatre historian Peter Thomson has drawn attention to this 'misalliance motif' prevalent in Victorian literature and drama, arguing that 'it was evidently possible to believe simultaneously that people should stick to their own class and that "Kind hearts

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[172] Albert Smith, *The Natural History of the Gent* (London: D. Bogue, 1847), 2.

[173] Ibid., 75–76.

[174] Henry James, 'The Liar: In Two Parts', *The Century Magazine*, May 1888, 124.

are more than coronets"'.[175] This contradiction allowed for the expression of class prejudice. In the popular play *Caste* (1867) by T.W. Robertson, one of the characters expresses this contradiction. Here 'caste' is a synonym for class: 'Oh, caste's all right. Caste is a good thing if it's not carried too far. It shuts the door on the pretentious and the vulgar; but it should open the door very wide for exceptional merit. Let brains break through its barriers.'[176] The message of Robertson's play was that the elite of society should embrace aspiring newcomers on their merit, so long as their behaviour was not vulgar. This contradiction was the problem facing Irving when he joined the theatre as an aspiring lower middle-class man. Without politeness, his talent as an actor would not have been sufficient for him to be accepted in polite society; and yet even learnt politeness would not protect him from the fact of his social background and the accompanying label of 'imposter of gentility'.

Furthermore, as an actor Irving had even more to prove given the prejudices against those in his profession in the nineteenth century. Theatre historian Jacky Bratton argues that actors generate uneasiness in audiences because of their ability to challenge 'our comfortable sense of the unique fixity of individuality': the figure on stage is two people, the mimic and the subject, and audiences are not able to confidently place the actor socially through manners and appearance as they usually can with others because of their awareness of his ability to perform identity.[177] The discomfort generated by the dual identity of the actor is the reason, Bratton argues, for the prejudices expressed about actors: 'The mimic may be a loose cannon in a social situation, and one of the deep roots of the opprobrium which fuels the anti-theatrical prejudice is here, in moral disapproval and fear of false appearances and deceit about who we are.'[178] This was certainly evident in representations of actors throughout the nineteenth century, manifesting in debates about their social status.[179] Irving often played the character of the gentleman whose status was in question, as chapter five will demonstrate, and it is possible that audiences conflated, consciously or not, the imposters of gentility Irving

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[175] Peter Thomson, *The Cambridge Introduction to English Theatre, 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 241.

[176] George Rowell, ed., *Nineteenth Century Plays*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 405.

[177] J.S. Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[178] Ibid., 107.

[179] Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Croom Helm, 1978).

played on stage with Irving's identity off-stage. It is perhaps in part because of this conflation that Irving had to work continually in his later career to underscore his social position and public reputation. Irving largely succeeded in this project: he was widely regarded as the figurehead of the Victorian stage, and was well known for his views on the respectability of the theatre and the acting profession. But comments about Irving's social background always dogged him, so he strategically used the positive aspects of the Victorian self-making narrative to counteract this. Later chapters demonstrate how Irving harnessed the wholesome notions of self-making in the first key biographical account of his life, published in 1883, and from that point forward he was repeatedly referred to in these terms.

The eccentric genius was another identity Irving cultivated. Historians have begun to explore the meanings of eccentricity in the nineteenth century, and in particular its association with the English character and its role in facilitating ideas about the transgression of boundaries.[180] In her study on the perceived relationship between natural science and eccentricity, historian Victoria Carroll argues that people were labelled eccentric when they challenged established limits. But, she suggests, the threat of transgression was contained during the process of public negotiation between performance and reception.[181] For Carroll, the intellectual field of science in particular engaged in defining and negotiating new boundaries in the nineteenth century. But this was also the case, I would argue, in the field of the arts, a milieu in which Victorian social, sartorial, domestic and behavioural conventions were constantly tested and transgressed. The labelling of avant-garde individuals in this milieu as eccentric enabled a safe cultural space for conventional habits, ideas and practices to be challenged, for the most part without retribution. This was Irving's experience, as chapter five will demonstrate.

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[180] Sophie Aymes-Stokes and Laurent Mellet, eds., 'Introduction', in *In and Out: Eccentricity in Britain* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 1–32; Langford, *Englishness Identified*; Julia F. Saville, 'Eccentricity as Englishness in David Copperfield', *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 42, no. 4 (15 November 2002): 781–97.

[181] Victoria Carroll, *Science and Eccentricity: Collecting, Writing and Performing Science for Early Nineteenth-Century Audiences* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008).

A strong cultural interest in eccentricity was visible in the print media in the nineteenth century. 'Eccentric biography' in particular, which emerged around 1800 as a subgenre of the expanding genre of life writing, helped to fuel the fascination with eccentricity.[182] Aimed at a growing readership from the lower middle class, eccentric biography covered a vast array of colourful subjects, contemporary and historical, rich and poor, men and women from different social classes who in some way flouted the conventions of their time, had participated in strange activities, or had unusual physical characteristics.[183] This linking of eccentricity with unusual physical characteristics would have implications for Irving when he became famous: his physical appearance and voice were frequently the subject of comment and caricature, a subject I will return to in later chapters. The visibility of the eccentric extended into plays, fiction (notably in the works of Charles Dickens), the newspaper and periodical press, and historical works.[184] Carroll also points to 'Spirit of the Age' essays in which nineteenth-century critics drew distinctions between their own and previous eras, using representative figures and what she terms 'boundary' characters.[185] These were marginal figures who did not fit in or who were out of kilter with the mores or habits of their time but were seen to communicate between past, present and future and were lauded for their moral courage.

Perhaps the most influential of the Spirit of the Age authors was the philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), whose essay *On Liberty* was first published in 1859 and ran to many editions. J.S. Mill was one of the most significant thinkers of the nineteenth century, and his works were celebrated and influential in his own time. Commenting at the end of the century on the significance of *On Liberty*, the writer Frederic Harrison

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[182] For a detailed discussion of the 'eccentric biography' genre, its origins, reception, audience and eccentricity's wider cultural impact in print media see James Gregory, 'Eccentric Biography and the Victorians', *Biography* 30, no. 3 (1 October 2007): 342–76.

[183] Early- and mid-Victorian examples include Henry Wilson, *The Book of Wonderful Characters: Memoirs and Anecdotes of Remarkable and Eccentric Persons in All Ages and Countries* (London, 1869); William Russell, *Eccentric Personages*, 2 vols (London: Ward & Lock, 1868); F.W. Fairholt, *Eccentric and Remarkable Characters. A Series of Biographical Memoirs of Persons Famous for Extraordinary Actions or Singularities*, vol. 1 (London, 1849); Robert Malcolm, *Curiosities of Biography: or, Memoirs of Wonderful and Extraordinary Characters* (London, 1855); John Timbs, *English Eccentrics and Eccentricities* (London, 1875).

[184] On eccentric figures in Victorian literature see Rainer Emig, 'Eccentricity Begins at Home: Carlyle's Centrality in Victorian Thought', *Textual Practice* 17, no. 2 (1 January 2003): 379–90; Saville, 'Eccentricity as Englishness in David Copperfield'. Examples of discussions about eccentricity in the periodical press include 'Conformity', in *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* (Edinburgh: W. Orr, 1850), 207–8; 'Eccentricity', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 19, no. 490 (18 March 1865): 307–8.

[185] Carroll, *Science and Eccentricity*, 14.

(1831-1923) said it produced 'a profound impression on contemporary thought, and had an extraordinary success with the public. It has been read by hundreds of thousands, and, to some of us… it became a sort of gospel'.[186] For Mill the threat to freedom came from social pressure to conform rather than from political oppression. He perceived an increasing social uniformity that endangered wellbeing, the strength of social ties and the value of human existence. Mill called for the cultivation and nurturing rather than the denigration of individuality in the few in whom it naturally occurred. This, he argued, would enrich human life, 'furnishing more abundant aliment to high thoughts and elevating feelings, and strengthening the tie which binds every individual to the race, by making the race infinitely better worth belonging to.'[187] Eccentrics were necessary in society because they questioned established ideas and practices, and 'set the example of more enlightened conduct, and better taste and sense in human life'.[188] Mill's essay was an appeal to embrace rather than censure differences in thought, social practices, appearances and behaviour, and for him individuality was synonymous with moral courage. In an oft-cited extract from *On Liberty*, Mill made explicit his view that eccentrics should be regarded as esteemed members of society:

> In this age, the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time.[189]

This was a call to action for those who dared to demonstrate difference. Mill championed the eccentric's high status in society, and explicitly linked the eccentric with the genius, a figure of cultural authority regarded as having rare and special powers.[190]

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[186] Quoted in Geoffrey Scarre, *Mill's On Liberty: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2007), 135.

[187] J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), 64.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Ibid., 67.

[190] On the birth of the idea of the 'modern genius' and its development in the early nineteenth century see Darrin McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

Whether critics agreed or disagreed with Mill's arguments in *On Liberty*, his ideas nevertheless received serious consideration.[191] In 1859, just as the young Irving was reaching adulthood, Mill in effect reignited critical public debate on the notion of individuality. By focusing on what he perceived as the deleterious nature of conformity, Mill illuminated the ambiguity of Victorian attitudes towards individuality and the paradoxical status of the eccentric, who was both ridiculed and revered in society. Mill moved the public discussion of eccentricity to a dialogue about the marginal and the conventional. Eccentricity was interesting to Mill not because of a morbid fascination with the abnormal but rather because of what it illuminated in the rest of society. In this way, Mill's thinking was not dissimilar to the argument in this thesis – the value of considering the particular for the knowledge it yields more widely.

We do not know whether Irving read Mill's *On Liberty*, but ideas about eccentricity and individuality were certainly prominent in the cultural ether as he reached manhood. Key figures in Irving's social milieu exhibited eccentricities, and I suggest in later chapters that these men inspired Irving to construct an eccentric persona for himself, safe in the knowledge that eccentricity was highly valued. In this way I suggest that Irving was not one of Mill's rare and 'natural' eccentric individuals but was instead, to borrow Langford's phrase, 'eccentric by intention'.[192]

The artistic bohemian was another identity Irving took on to strengthen his social position. Since the mid nineteenth century representations of bohemia have suggested alternative modes of living in which cross-class social and sexual intermingling occurred. There is an extensive historiography on nineteenth- and twentieth-century English, French and American bohemia, and much of this historical analysis has been about class. For many historians bohemia functioned as a site of social and sexual liberation for educated, privileged men, and they explore the adversarial political and social meanings of bohemia's relationship to bourgeois culture. Elizabeth Wilson, for example, argues that bohemia was an overtly political space in which the repressive conventions of bourgeois

[191] Criticism of *On Liberty* was largely hostile, with serious reservations about Mill's main arguments. See John Rees, *Mill and his Early Critics* (Leicester: University College, 1956); John Skorupski, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Mill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[192] Langford, *Englishness Identified*, 302.

culture could be challenged.[193] Similarly, in his study of French bohemia in the nineteenth century Jerrold Seigel suggests bohemia was a symbolic liminal space in which the incongruities and conflicts of bourgeois life could be negotiated.[194] This kind of analysis suggests the dependency of the privileged men who participated in bohemia on the class system that they had always benefited from. I suggest that a closer look at individuals moving in this milieu in the mid nineteenth century adds another dimension to our understanding of bohemia. It provided Irving at this specific time with the opportunity to move in an environment in which the social attitudes and conditions enabled him to learn the bodily practices and behaviour of gentility. Bohemia enabled Irving to embed himself in polite culture.

The figure of the 'bohemian' emerged as a recognised concept in the 1850s following the publication in 1851 of the novel *Scenes de la Vie de Boheme* by French writer Henry Murger. His stories about the lives of artists living in the Latin Quarter of Paris received widespread fame and critical attention in France. Extracts from it were quickly reprinted in the English press, transferring the concept of bohemianism to English readers and into the English cultural imagination.[195] Murger depicted a world characterised by youthful rebellion, playfulness, sociability, poverty and fraternity, in which young men ignored the social conventions of respectable bourgeois life and dedicated themselves to the pursuit of artistic production. But Murger's bohemia was a contained space of rebellion which, in historian Mary Gluck's words, was 'subversive, but also safe'; it was dependent on the bourgeois world in that it provided an opportunity for deviation from social conventions, but ultimately also an inevitable return to them.[196] Murger's bohemia was just a phase in life:

> This frittering away of idle days with the prodigality of people who think they will live forever, all this has to end… Poetry does not exist only in a disorderly

[193] Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (London: IB Tauris, 2000).

[194] Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). See also Peter Brooker, *Bohemia in London: The Social Scene of Early Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Janet Lyon, 'Sociability in the Metropole: Modernism's Bohemian Salons', *ELH* 76, no. 3 (3 September 2009): 687–711.

[195] 'The Bohemians of Art and Literature', *Ainsworth's Magazine* 20 (July 1851).

[196] Mary Gluck, *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 19.

> existence; in impoverished pleasures; in love affairs that last the life-time of a candle; or in a more or less eccentric rebellion against prejudices that will always dominate the world… It is not necessary to wear a summer overcoat in the middle of winter to have talent; one can be a real poet or artist while keeping one's feet warm and eating three meals a day.[197]

The influence of Murger's depiction of the bohemian has led to the construction of an enduring myth about artistic life, one which Wilson describes as 'a way of life encompassing certain forms of behaviour and a particular set of attitudes toward the practice of art'.[198] Gluck has usefully described this myth as 'sentimental bohemia', and this romantic idea of bohemia was the dominant version circulating in English popular culture in the mid-Victorian years.[199] This was the idea of English bohemia that the novelist W.M. Thackeray depicted in 1861 in *The Adventures of Philip*:

> a land over which hangs an endless fog, occasioned by much tobacco; a land of chambers, billiard-rooms, supper-rooms, oysters; a land of song… a land of tin-dish covers from taverns, and frothing porter; a land of lotos-eating [sic] (with lots of cayenne pepper), of pulls on the river, of delicious readings of novels, magazines, and saunterings in many studios; a land where men call each other by their Christian names; where most are poor, where almost all are young, and where if a few oldsters do enter, it is because they have preserved more tenderly and carefully than other folks their youthful spirits, and the delightful capacity to be idle.[200]

The habits of the bohemian in this evocative extract demonstrate privilege. Eccentrics came from across the classes, but bohemians were specifically gentlemen in the Victorian imagination. Although the bohemian may be poor, this is poverty by choice not desperation: he lives in chambers, the abode of single gentlemen; he plays billiards and goes boating, leisure pursuits of the wealthy; and he demonstrates his education through his engagement with art and literature.

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[197] Quoted in Ibid., 18.

[198] Wilson, *Glamorous Outcasts*, 6.

[199] Gluck, *Popular Bohemia*. For alternative discussions of bohemian London in the nineteenth century see Richard Schoch, 'Performing Bohemia', *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film* 30, no. 2 (2004): 1–13; Patrick Brantlinger, 'Bohemia Versus Grub Street: Artists' and Writers' Communities in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 16, no. 4 (1983): 25–42.

[200] W.M. Thackeray, *The Adventures of Philip* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1886), 143.

The privileged social position of its participants was repeated in other depictions of bohemia. In *Westminster Review* in 1863, the journalist Justin McCarthy (1830-1912) pointed to a 'thoroughly British Bohemia', specifying the social class of its members: 'Whatever the genuine Bohemian may be, it is absolute and essential that he must never be vulgar, and that he must always at least have the sympathies of a scholar and an artist, and something of the native grace of a gentleman.'[201] In this extract McCarthy used the terminology familiar from behavioural advice literature, which associated bohemianism with a certain class of man: polite rather than 'vulgar'. He should be learned and cultured ('the sympathies of a scholar and an artist') and have the bodily movements and behavioural aspects of a gentleman (indicated in his use of the word 'grace'). McCarthy's words also echoed those of advice writers in his repeated insistence on natural distinctions – the 'true' and 'genuine' bohemian was a 'native' gentleman. In McCarthy's view the cultural image of the British bohemian was a mode of gentility. This view was repeated in other representations of the British bohemian in the mid-Victorian years.[202] In this sense adopting a bohemian identity helped Irving to underscore his status as a gentleman, and chapter five will examine how he made use of this in his own self-presentation.

Although this image of British bohemia was constructed, it did have roots in a real-world community and environment. In her study of the Holland Park Circle Caroline Dakers illuminated one the most influential groups of bohemians in the mid-Victorian period. This was an educated and cultured elite of artists, poets and patrons residing at and orbiting around Little Holland House in Kensington. At the heart of this network were Henry Thoby Prinsep (1792-1878), East India Company director and politician, and his wife Sara (1816-1878), who was one of seven daughters of James Pattle, a wealthy merchant and Bengal civil servant. Little Holland House became known for its unconventionality largely because of the presence of the exotic, beautiful and talented Pattle sisters who created a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, spoke in Hindustani to

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[201] Justin McCarthy, 'The Literature of Bohemia', *Westminster Review*, January 1863: 32-56, 50.

[202] See, for example, the depiction of literary life in T.W. Robertson's 1865 comedy *Society*; Carl Benson, 'A New Theory of Bohemians', *Sharpe's London Magazine of Entertainment and Instruction* 35 (July 1869): 289–92; G.A. Sala, *Twice Round the Clock; or, The Hours of the Day and Night in London* (London: Houlston and Wright, 1859).

each other and dressed in handmade garments made of rare Indian materials.[203] One contemporary observer described them as 'making bohemian respectable'.[204] The Prinseps hosted some of the leading figures of the day from the worlds of art, literature, politics, academia and science. The reach of this unconventional household therefore extended out into wider polite circles and helped to establish the idea of bohemian gentility in the mid-Victorian period. Other bohemian centres in the 1860s included the St John's Wood Clique and Rossetti's house in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea where guests included the eccentric painter J.M. Whistler (1834-1903) and the poet A.C. Swinburne (1837-1909).[205]

Despite the privileged backgrounds of many of these real-world inhabitants of bohemia, it did include people from lower middle-class backgrounds. The sense that bohemia was a place of non-conformity enabled a degree of laissez-faire in social mixing, particularly when this allowed men with artistic talent to thrive. There was a strong current of opinion in the mid-Victorian years that artistic genius was found not only amongst the polite, but from the ranks of the vulgar classes too. In a journal article first published in 1854 entitled 'The Parvenus' Samuel Smiles argued that it was important to draw on talent from all classes: 'All our great men, without exception are parvenus. Our poets, our sculptors, our painters, our authors, are all men who have risen from the ranks'.[206] He underscored this idea with a chapter in *Self-Help* on 'Workers in Art' as well as providing historical examples of 'self-made' men who had been arts practitioners throughout this book. Other influential voices were also making a similar case. John Ruskin argued that there was a fixed amount of natural-born artistic genius in every nation, much of which came from the labouring classes. It was essential, Ruskin claimed in 1857, to find these artists and nurture them for the value that they would bring to the nation as a whole. His argument had similarities with Mill's on eccentricity, and again

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[203] Caroline Dakers, *The Holland Park Circle: Artists and Victorian Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[204] Quoted in Ibid., 28.

[205] Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Rossetti and His Circle* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997); Juliet Hacking, *Princes of Victorian Bohemia: Photographs by David Wilkie Wynfield* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2000).

[206] Samuel Smiles, 'The Parvenus', in *Life and Labour* (London, 1887), chapter V.

came at the same time as Irving was reaching manhood. The process of nurturing artistic talent involved making gentlemen of these young men:

> I am sorry to say, that of all parts of an artist's education, this is the most neglected among us; and that even where the natural taste and feeling of the youth have been pure and true, where there was the right stuff in him to make a gentleman of, you may too frequently discern some jarring rents in his mind, and elements of degradation in his treatment of subject, owing to want of gentle training, and of the liberal influence of literature.[207]

Ruskin was here advocating for artistic patronage of vulgar men with talent, to give them what he termed 'gentle training'. By the end of the nineteenth century this idea started to be challenged, but Irving benefited from it in the mid-Victorian period.[208] This practice of being 'made' into a gentleman was precisely what happened to Irving.

Chapter four focuses specifically on the social mix of the theatrical world, but it should be noted that this cross-class social mixing occurred throughout bohemia. Art historian Juliet Hacking has discussed the perceived social status of the fine artist in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in light of the discussions about whether artists were gentlemen in the 1863 Select Committee enquiry on the workings of the Royal Academy.[209] And on literary and journalistic bohemia, the historian Patrick Leary has demonstrated the diverse social composition of the community of writers contributing to *Punch* magazine in the mid-Victorian years. Shirley Brooks (1816-1874), the deputy editor, remarked that, 'we are, there's no denying it, a remarkable lot… All come from different spheres of society and bring our experiences thence to be fused in the Punch fire'.[210] This happy picture of a cohesive and diverse social milieu was, however, not quite the reality. *Punch* was able to harness talent from all levels of society but class tensions existed amongst the contributors, mirroring those in society at large. The snobbery of the well-born Thackeray (1811-1863), for example, towards his colleague Douglas Jerrold (1803-1857), the son of a strolling actor, frequently surfaced. In one account Thackeray's

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[207] John Ruskin, *A Joy Forever* (London: George Allen, 1906), 33.

[208] Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: Heinemann, 1895).

[209] Hacking, *Princes of Victorian Bohemia*.

[210] Henry Silver diary, 27 June 1866, quoted in Patrick Leary, *The Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian London* (London: The British Library Board, 2010), 34.

comments about Jerrold were reminiscent of the tone of etiquette books. His colleague Mark Lemon (1809-1870) recalled that, 'Thackeray said that Douglas Jerrold ate his peas with his knife and therefore was not fit company for him'.[211] Jerrold was lauded for his wit and biting satire, both in his writings and in his conversation, but this did not protect him from class prejudice. In later chapters I will provide examples that show Irving suffered similar prejudice, and that he attempted to use self-making, eccentricity and bohemianism to counter this. But the obverse of these ideas continued to call into question the social status he had acquired: whilst he was lauded as a self-made man he was also criticised for his social origins; he was admired for his bohemianism and eccentricities and also lampooned for them.

Conclusion

This chapter has laid the groundwork for the central argument that runs through this thesis, that Victorians interpreted status through bodily comportment and behaviour during social interaction; that there were two status groups in society, the polite and the vulgar; and that upward social mobility between these groups was dependent on a long process of acculturation in polite culture. I have situated these claims in the historiography of class in the nineteenth century, and demonstrated how the embodiment of class and the division into two groups marks a departure from existing interpretations. Further, I have challenged previous histories which claim that polished self-presentation became increasingly irrelevant to social status with the rise of the industrial middle class. Using advice literature and novels as indicators of cultures of class, I have identified the elements of politeness which the Victorians believed were essential attributes for those who commanded the most power in society. Irving's social mobility was dependent on his learning these elements of politeness. The rest of the thesis outlines some of the material and cultural barriers that restricted social mobility for the majority, and examines the circumstances of one man who was able to overcome them. It considers how the different contexts of Irving's early life readied him for what he was later able to achieve, and how he constructed his public identity to strengthen and protect his authenticity as a gentleman in the face of class prejudice. In this chapter I

[211] Quoted in Ibid., 31.

have indicated three cultural ideas circulating in Victorian society that Irving used for this purpose: the self-made man, the eccentric genius, and the artistic bohemian. In the following chapters I will show how these ideas were circulating in the cultural ether as Irving was growing up and were part of his cognizance.

Chapter Two:
Irving's Childhood

This chapter examines Irving's social background and early life in order to position him at this stage in his primary culture, the lower middle-class. I provide a detailed account of Irving's life in rural Cornwall and then his home in the City of London in the middle of the nineteenth century to demonstrate the importance of these contexts for modulating his particular experience. Because evidence for the early part of Irving's life is less readily available than for the later part of his career I have looked to autobiographies, accounts and novels written by contemporaries, which give a suggestion of the kind of experiences Irving might have had in his childhood. This material supplements Irving's archives, allowing me to build up a more detailed picture of his early life and to demonstrate the resources from which he composed himself. I will consider how Irving's childhood experiences might have been a factor in his extraordinary achievements in later years. I look closely at the people around the young Irving to demonstrate the ideas and attitudes he was exposed to, and from this the significance of social networks in the construction of Irving's identity starts to emerge. The culture of self-improvement was strong in Irving's lower middle-class milieu and we see him responding to these Victorian ideas about self-making. In this way my argument starts to make the case for the significance of the particular in historical analysis.

Throughout the chapter I also consider how Irving later retold the events of his early life. The considerable amount of detail I provide about Irving's family and experiences in this chapter is necessary in order to show this contrast. I will show just how constructed the 'official' narrative of Irving's life was as it appeared in his first biography *Henry Irving: A Biographical Sketch* published in 1883.[212] This account established the myths surrounding Irving, which dominated subsequent accounts of his

[212] Austin Brereton, *Henry Irving: A Biographical Sketch* (London: David Bogue, 1883).

life.[213] In this and the following chapters I draw repeatedly on this first biography in order to demonstrate the differences between the story that Irving constructed about himself and the realities of his life. And importantly, I suggest reasons for why he needed to construct such a story about himself.

The first part of the chapter begins by briefly setting Irving's 1883 biography in context. Next I will examine the background of Irving's parents in some detail to give a sense of their family cultures. The chapter then focuses on Irving's boyhood in the west of England and his move to Cornwall to live with his aunt and uncle. The later part of the chapter charts Irving's abrupt relocation from this remote rural environment to the bustling hub of London to re-join his parents at the age of eleven. In London his father Samuel had found work as a clerk, a typical lower middle-class occupation which by the late nineteenth century had become synonymous with semi-educated vulgarity. Tellingly, the 1883 biography makes no mention of Irving's father. But this did not prevent rumours about Irving's lower middle-class family from spreading, and Irving's social background became one of the subjects for which he was ridiculed in the press when he was at the height of his career. This chapter therefore starts to examine how and why Victorians policed the boundaries of polite society, and begins to make the case that an examination of one individual's experiences can provide fresh insights into social attitudes in nineteenth-century Britain.

Irving's 1883 biography

Irving's 'official' biography was, in many ways, typical of the life-writing genre in the late nineteenth century in that it was constructed to protect and strengthen Irving's reputation rather than to reveal his weaknesses. It covered his early life and childhood, suggesting the development of a sound character through these early experiences and his relationships with family members. Typical also of the nineteenth-century auto/biography was the focus on Irving's professional successes and achievements, with little discussion of his private or domestic life in adulthood. Also in keeping with other

[213] Even, to a certain extent, Irving's most recent biography Jeffrey Richards, *Sir Henry Irving: A Victorian Actor and His World* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005).

biographies of this time were some playful and forgivable criticisms of his character that gave Irving's representation credibility. Irving is depicted as experiencing several disappointments during his life, which are used as examples to demonstrate the strength and resilience of his character rather than any failings on his part. These criticisms and disappointments give credence to the depiction of Irving's life experiences and personality. But typical too of Victorian auto/biography is the impression that Irving's weaknesses did not ultimately outweigh his strengths as a virtuous man. Following the conventions of the life writing of its time, Irving's first biography therefore presented a highly edited version of his life and character, omitting many aspects in order to construct a picture of an upstanding individual.[214]

In 1883 when the biography was published, Irving had reached the height of his professional and social success. Less than five years earlier he had taken over the management of the Lyceum Theatre, and in the ensuing years Irving's reputation had gone from strength to strength. In the autumn of 1878 he commissioned his old Manchester friend, the architect Alfred Darbyshire (1838-1908), to upgrade the interiors of the Lyceum, which enhanced its status as one of the most fashionable theatres in London. From that point his productions had received widespread critical acclaim; a particularly notable success was Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, which had opened in November 1879 and ran for several months to a packed house. Irving also produced *The Cup*, a play by poet laureate Alfred Tennyson (1809 – 1892) in 1881. Although this production was not as financially successful, Irving's reputation was greatly enhanced by the association with this towering Victorian literary figure. In February 1882 Irving became a member of one of the most exclusive gentlemen's clubs in London, The Athenaeum. During the same year he was invited to dine with Edward, Prince of Wales (1841-1910) at his private residence Marlborough House, and breakfasted with Prime Minister Gladstone (1809-1898) at Downing Street. In the summer of 1883 came perhaps

[214] Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); David Amigoni, ed., *Life Writing and Victorian Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Clinton Machann, *The Genre of Autobiography in Victorian Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (London: Macmillan, 1984); Julie F. Codell, *The Victorian Artist: Artists' Lifewritings in Britain, 1870-1910* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); J.S. Bratton, 'Anecdote and Mimicry as History', in *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 95–132; Mary Corbett, 'Performing Identities: Actresses and Autobiography', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 109–26; Gilli Bush-Bailey, *Performing Herself: Autobiography and Fanny Kelly's Dramatic Recollections* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

his most prestigious social and professional recognition to date – the banquet at St James's Hall held in his honour. In the autumn of the same year, after going on a valedictory tour of the country attending many celebratory dinners and events, Irving and his theatre company sailed to the USA for a six-month tour.

Irving commissioned the young journalist Austin Brereton (1862-1922) to write his biography in this critical year, and his choice of author was undoubtedly a strategic move on Irving's part. Brereton was born in Liverpool and moved to London in 1881 at the age of nineteen. He quickly became involved in the Irving 'machinery', after being taken on as private secretary to Irving's close associate the drama critic Clement Scott (1841-1904). As a young newcomer to Londoner making his way in dramatic criticism it was in Brereton's interests to ally himself with the biggest actor of the day and to maintain Irving's profile as a respectable man. Brereton therefore suppressed or made more acceptable through the romanticised language of self-making the less salubrious parts of Irving's life story that would leave him vulnerable to attack from the snobbish late-Victorian elite. Irving was aware of these vulnerabilities, and attempted to control the information that circulated about his private life. In his later posthumous biography of Irving's life Brereton wrote that Irving,

> took a keen interest in the work, and he annotated many of its pages… He found it necessary, for divers specific reasons, to have his interests guarded, in certain directions, in the newspaper world, and I was his trusted representative in these matters. From this time until his death, he told me much of his life's story, and sent me many letters containing valuable notes and suggestions in regard to his career.[215]

With this statement Brereton intended to support his own credibility as biographer, indicating that he was Irving's confidante in many private matters. Indeed after writing the 1883 biography Brereton later became even more heavily involved in the policing of Irving's reputation in his capacity as Irving's public relations agent (as we would call it today) from 1898 to 1905. What the statement above also indicates is Irving's own caution about divulging personal information, and his interest in protecting his reputation.

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[215] Austin Brereton, *The Life of Henry Irving* (London: Longmans Green, 1908), vi.

There were several things in Irving's past and in his private affairs that made him vulnerable to criticism and that he wanted to keep from the public domain. Firstly, Irving's conduct in his domestic life fell far short of Victorian standards of middle-class respectability: he had abandoned his wife Florence in 1872, just two years after their marriage, leaving her to look after their two young children. In an age when separation and divorce were possible but publicly still regarded as shameful, this was certainly a black mark against his reputation as the respectable figurehead of the Victorian Stage. Secondly, Irving had not exercised thrift in his past financial dealings and was constantly in debt. Irving had been so short of money that he had been unable to sufficiently maintain the stability of his marital home, which breached polite standards of respectability. Irving had lived beyond his means throughout his twenties and thirties, had been constantly in debt, and had resorted to begging for loans from family, friends and usurers in order to get by. Chapter five discusses these aspects of Irving's past in greater detail and the strategies he used to navigate these potentially compromising aspects of his life.

This chapter and chapter three, however, focus on the third of Irving's weaknesses: his social origins. In a society in which social position and hierarchies of class were fundamentally important to the dynamics of power in social relations, Irving's vulgar lower middle-class family was a potential source of embarrassment and criticism. By the late nineteenth century increasingly prevalent ideas about education emphasised the importance of a particular kind of schooling and knowledge that Irving did not have. But more significantly, Irving had 'committed the sin' of crossing class boundaries from vulgar to polite. The crossing of this boundary was an uncomfortable and prevalent theme in Victorian culture. Chapter one examined the Victorian narrative of the self-made man, a character type for whom in theory it was acceptable to make this social transition; in practice, however, the reception of self-made social climbers was not so generous. The criticisms Irving's contemporaries levelled at him demonstrate the social snobberies of the Victorian elite. These criticisms were sometimes direct, sometimes subtle, and appeared in letters pages, opinion columns, critical essays, dramatic reviews and caricatures in the print media. Evidence of how Irving's contemporaries gossiped about him is also contained in autobiographies published after his death. One of Irving's

defences against criticisms of his social origins was the 1883 biography, in which he strategically constructed his life story in the language of self-making in order to position himself as a respectable and worthy public figurehead.[216]

Irving's family background and childhood

Henry Irving was born John Brodribb on 6 February 1838.[217] He adopted his stage name at the age of eighteen, by which time the young Irving had already experienced considerable personal upheavals and had encountered a range of attitudes, ideas and social milieus. This childhood experience contributed to Irving's ability to start exploring and changing his identity. His parents Samuel and Mary Brodribb were residing in the village of Keinton Mandeville in Somerset at the time of his birth. Samuel Brodribb (1802-1876) was also born in Somerset, although his birthplace was over twenty miles away in the village of Clutton. Samuel came from a large family: Irving's paternal grandfather John Brodribb (1757-1831) and his wife Elizabeth (1763-1844) were married on 23 December 1783 in the parish of Clutton, and had at least eight other children: John (1786-1815), Eliza (b.1788), William (1790-1862), Mary (1793-1875), James (b.1796), Ann (1797-1882), Henry (b.1799) and Sarah (b.1805).[218] Birth, marriage and death records show that the Brodribbs had been based in and around Clutton for several generations, and there were many branches of the family living locally.[219] Irving's father Samuel therefore spent his childhood as part of an extensive kinship network, with many children of similar age who lived within the same parish. This network remained essential to Samuel for support throughout his life.

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[216] On the interweaving of the narrative of self-help into the autobiographies of less celebrated men see Donna Loftus, 'The Self in Society: Middle-Class Men and Autobiography', in *Life Writing and Victorian Culture*, ed. David Amigoni (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 67–85.

[217] It is not clear when Henry became part of his name; Irving appeared as simply 'John Brodribb' on his birth certificate: 'John Brodribb' (1838) *Certified Copy of an Entry of Birth for John Brodribb, 6 February 1838.* Application Number 6521464-1. Langport Registration District.

[218] There seems to be another son, Thomas, who appears in later records but I have not been able to trace his birth record.

[219] Thomas Brodribb, *Notes of the Brodribbs: An Old Family of Somerset* (Kew, Vic: T. Brodribb, 1916).

Samuel Brodribb had been geographically mobile in adulthood in order to earn a living, and this had a significant impact on Irving's early life. His father, John Brodribb, had been a farmer, which was a long-standing intergenerational occupation in the West Country.[220] Sons commonly followed in the footsteps of their fathers, with one son taking on the family farm whilst the others rented smaller farms nearby.[221] But this did not happen with the Brodribbs: only one of John's five sons, William, became a farmer.[222] Samuel and three of his brothers moved away from Clutton, probably because farming in the local area no longer provided sufficient income and work opportunities.[223] These brothers moved to Bristol, ten miles from Clutton, and set up their own businesses. Samuel became a 'provision merchant', whilst his brother James set up in business as a linen draper and Henry as a grocer.[224] The brothers had differing levels of success in commerce. Henry joined in partnership with George Webb (who married his sister Sarah in 1825), but they were declared bankrupt in 1826.[225] James fared better in business as a tailor and woollen draper, announcing to the buying public in *The Bristol Mercury* in 1830 that he had 'engaged one of the first-rate London Cutters' and was 'keeping a choice collection of Goods of the very best manufacturers, and on the lowest terms'.[226] Less is known about Samuel's success at this stage, but later records, as I will show, indicate that he was not a successful businessman in general.

Irving's mother Mary Behenna (1807-1862) had also moved away from her birthplace, so both of Irving's parents were accustomed to geographical movement. Mary was born and brought up in the village of Uny Lelant near St Ives in west Cornwall. Like Samuel, Mary also came from a large family: her father Thomas Behenna (b.1769) and his wife Catherine (b.1772) married on 16 November 1796 and had at least nine children. And like Samuel's father, Thomas Behenna was also a farmer. Nothing is known about the

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[220] Samuel's sister Mary describes herself as a 'farmer's daughter' in the census return of 1861: TNA, 1861 ESW Census RG09/21/46/35.

[221] Robin Stanes, *The Old Farm: A History of Farming Life in the West Country* (Exeter: Devon Books, 1990).

[222] TNA, 1851 ESW Census HO107/1939/241/19.

[223] Stanes, *Old Farm*.

[224] On Samuel in Bristol see *The London Gazette*, 17 October 1843, Issue 20270, Page 3396.

[225] Marriage of George Webb to Sarah Brodribb, Somerset Marriages (post-1754), 21 Oct 1825; *The London Gazette*, 9 February 1827, Issue 18334, Page 329.

[226] *The Bristol Mercury* , 19 October 1830, Issue 2113.

size of Thomas's farm, but it is unlikely to have been large. Cornwall had a distinctive farm structure due to the influence of mining in the area, which meant a higher than average number of holdings below twenty acres worked by small subsistence farmers.[227] It is not known how Irving's parents met. One possibility is that Samuel travelled down to St Ives during the 1830s when he was working as a provision merchant in Bristol, and met Mary there. Cornwall had no road or rail infrastructure in the first half of the nineteenth century, so travel by land to this distant county was not easy. Located in the farthest reaches of western Cornwall, St Ives was particularly remote, but it was a coastal town and therefore accessible by sea.[228] Steam packets were regularly plying between Bristol and St Ives so this was probably Samuel's route to Cornwall.[229] In 1835 Samuel brought Mary to Bristol and they were married on 24 March.[230] After their marriage, Samuel and Mary moved to London. The reason for their move is not known, but it is likely that Samuel was struggling financially. It was common for families to rely on each other as economic and social units, so it is probable that Samuel moved to London at the same time as his brother Henry, who, perhaps looking to make a fresh start away from Bristol following his bankruptcy, set up as a grocer in Bread Street, Cheapside.[231] Samuel worked as an assistant at a firm of linen drapers, Griffith Foulkes and Sons at 2-3 Little Russell Street, during his time in London; it is possible that Samuel's brother James or his brother-in-law Robert Catley (also working as a linen-draper in Bristol) were business contacts of Griffith Foulkes and had arranged his work placement.[232]

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[227] William Rowe, *Cornwall in the Age of the Industrial Revolution* (Liverpool: University Press, 1953); Sarah Wilmot, 'Farming in the Nineteenth Century', in *Historical Atlas of South-West England*, ed. Roger Kain and William Ravenhill (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), 294–306.

[228] John Kanefsky, 'Turnpike Roads', in *ibid*. 357–63; Richard Oliver, 'Canals and Railways in the Nineteenth Century', in *ibid*. 264–76.

[229] John Chilcott, *Chilcott's Descriptive History of Bristol, Ancient and Modern*, Third Ed. (Bristol: J. Chilcott, 1840), 95.

[230] I have been unable to locate their marriage record. Deacon states it took place on 24 March 1835 in Stapleton, Bristol in Bernard Deacon, *The Cornish Family: The Roots of Our Future* (Cornwall Editions Ltd, 2004), 138.

[231] Bankruptcy proceedings against Henry were ongoing until at least 1834: *The London Gazette*, Issue 19109, Page 2280. Henry was certainly living in London by 1838, when he appeared as a witness in an Old Bailey trial: *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* [www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, accessed 10 June 2017], February 1838, trial of Thomas Thompson (t18380226-703).

[232] Details of the shop at 2-3 Russell Street appear in evidence of a case of theft heard at the Old Bailey on 11 June 1829: *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* [www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, accessed 10 June 2017], June 1829, trial of Richard Ellis (t18290611-204).

How long Samuel and Mary remained in London is unclear, but they had relocated to the village of Keinton Mandeville in Somerset by 1838 when Irving was born. Situated on the road from London to Taunton, Keinton Mandeville's main economy was centred on quarrying when the Brodribbs were living there.[233] The village had rapidly increased in population during the first half of the nineteenth century due to the expansion of the local quarrying industry: between 1811 and 1841 the population had more than doubled from 261 to 586. Although there appear to be a few widows living on their own means, the 1841 census shows Keinton Mandeville to be a working-class parish with no evidence of resident gentry. Stone cutting provided the principle occupation for most of the inhabitants of the village, as well as a significant number of agricultural labourers. Cloth and clothing was also another aspect of its economic life. A number of people were involved in the manufacture of clothing, including sixteen tailors, three dress makers and three shoe makers, more than would be expected for the needs of a village of this size. There was also a family of teasel growers, presumably supplying for the local cloth trade. It is likely therefore that Samuel moved his family to Keinton because he had made contacts there through his family or through his employer in London.

In Keinton Samuel worked for a company of linen-drapers, Charman and Gray.[234] In a posthumously published biography of Irving, Samuel is said to have had a small shop in Keinton.[235] On Irving's birth certificate Samuel is listed as a linen draper but whether he was ever a shopkeeper in Keinton is not certain. What his role was at Charman and Gray is also unclear. Irving's mother registered her son's birth, so it was possible that Samuel was not present in the village when he was born; three years later Mary and Irving were in Keinton for the 1841 Census, but Samuel's whereabouts on the day of the census are not known.[236] This might suggest that Samuel was away on business, perhaps as a commercial traveller for the company. Although the village appeared to be increasing in prosperity (by 1841 there were two public houses and an inn, as well as a grocer and a glass and china dealer), the Brodribbs continued to struggle financially. In

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[233] Mary Siraut, ed., *The Victoria History of the Counties of England: A History of the County of Somerset, X: Castle Cary and the Brue-Cary Watershed* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 150.

[234] *The London Gazette*, 17 October 1843, Issue, 20270, Page 3396.

[235] Brereton, *The Life*, 2.

[236] TNA, 1841 EWS Census HO107/937/13/14/22

the 1841 census, Mary and her son were living in cramped conditions in two small rooms of a six-room stone terraced house on Castle Street in the same abode as the village teasel grower, his wife and their six children. Their accommodation suggests the Brodribb family were in very straightened circumstances. Why Samuel had not moved his family back to Bristol to be amongst his kin after leaving London is not known. But the Brodribbs were certainly a little more distant from their familial network in Keinton and this lack of support in their immediate vicinity is perhaps one reason why the family did not thrive there.

By 1842 the Brodribbs had moved back to Bristol, although it is not clear why. Brereton's 1908 biography quotes a speech made by Irving in 1904 in which he recollected some early childhood memories of Bristol, which provide dates for their move to the city.[237] Irving remembered the American animal trainer Isaac Van Amburgh leading horses through the streets of Bristol, an event that took place on 25 August 1842.[238] Irving also recalled the appearance of Prince Albert at the launch of SS Great Britain, which happened on 19 July 1843. It is probable that Samuel moved his family back to Bristol in order to seek financial security amongst his kin, a number of whom were living there at this time. Samuel's older brother James and his brother-in-law Robert Catley were still operating as drapers, and his other brother-in-law George Webb was by this time running his own business from 22 Union Street as a 'public accountant and auctioneer'.[239] However, Samuel's kin do not seem to have provided employment for him, and he found himself drifting from job to job, working first as a commercial traveller for a brass founder, then a brewer.[240] He was clearly not a gifted salesman, and was for a time unemployed.

Irving did not remain long in Bristol, however, and was soon on the move again for the second time in his young life. Things had rapidly deteriorated financially for Samuel in Bristol, and in October 1843 he was imprisoned for debt.[241] It was at this crisis

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[237] Brereton, *The Life*, 4–5.

[238] *The Bristol Mercury* 20 August 1842 issue 2736.

[239] TNA 1841 EWS Census HO107/377//6/24/431841 census; *Pigot's Directory of Gloucestershire* (London: James Pigot & Co., 1830).

[240] *The London Gazette*, 17 October 1843, Issue, 20270, Page 3396.

[241] Ibid.

point that Mary took Irving to live with his maternal aunt, Sarah Penberthy, near St. Ives in Cornwall. Brereton's 1883 biography of Irving avoids mention of any of these difficulties, and the decision to remove Irving to Cornwall was put down to the bad air and cramped conditions of London, where his parents moved next: 'His mother, anxious that her boy should breathe the fresh air of her native Cornwall, rather than the confined atmosphere of central London, took him, when he was little more than a baby, to her sister'.[242] Brereton's language here, strongly connecting Cornwall to nature through the use of the terms 'native' and 'fresh air', was a theme that dominates the passages in the 1883 biography on Irving's boyhood. I will demonstrate more fully later that this romanticised depiction of Irving as a child helped to create an idealised fantasy of the actor's life that was a far cry from the harsh realities of his family situation. Passages like this contributed to the myth of Irving as a natural creative genius destined for greatness which, interlaced with narratives of his toil against adversity, underscored his position in the late nineteenth century as the archetypal Victorian self-made man. The reality behind these words was that Irving was separated from his parents by his father's inability to support the family. It is likely that his Bristol kin settled Samuel's debts because the Court for the Relief of Insolvent Debtors granted him a discharge on 8 November 1843.[243] The extract above suggests that Irving's mother went ahead to London without Samuel; it is not known at what point her husband joined her but they were both in London by 1849 when Irving was reunited with his parents. Meanwhile, for six years, from the age of five to eleven, Irving lived away from his parents in Cornwall.

This evidence, about Irving's father and his wider kin, places the Brodribbs socially as lower middle class. Significantly, in contrast to many contemporary auto/biographies that dwelt on family heritage as a means of underscoring the subject's high social status, Irving's 1883 biography passes quickly over his parents. Irving's father barely receives a mention except to say that he was 'a man of somewhat restless and undecided character, with whom the world did not prosper'.[244] This use of the term 'character' is significant in the context of Irving's depiction as a self-made man. Strength of character in self-making

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[242] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 2.

[243] *The Bristol Mercury,* 11 Nov 1843. On imprisonment for debt in Victorian England see V. Markham Lester, *Victorian Insolvency: Bankruptcy, Imprisonment for Debt, and Company Winding-up in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

[244] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 2.

narratives indicated a man's innate gentility and therefore minimised the focus on social origins. Samuel's 'undecided' character contrasted with his son's 'dominating personality' and served to enhance Irving's stature yet further.[245] Samuel was not respectable in middle-class terms: he was not able to provide sufficient income to support his own very small family. History was due to repeat itself in this regard for Samuel's son, as chapter five will demonstrate. How much of the true picture of his family Irving shared with his biographer is not known, but in life as in death Brereton maintained Irving's reputation. His posthumously published biography in 1908 similarly describing Samuel in docile terms as a man who 'had not the good fortune to be successful in a commercial sense' and 'prosperity did not come to him'.[246] Brereton even suggested an element of undue gravitas about Samuel and his family in this later biography:

> His father was Samuel Brodribb, a tall, somewhat portly man, and an excellent rider as were all the male members of his family, for they were of yeoman stock and were accustomed to riding in to the markets at Bath and Bristol from the village of Clutton, their ancestral home. The old church has many memorials to the Brodribb family, for Henry Irving's grandfather and various other ancestors were buried in Clutton.[247]

Brereton's use of the words 'yeoman' and 'ancestral home' presented a nostalgic fantasy of a bye-gone rural Englishness which emerged in later Victorian thinking, and which, historians argue, was in response to a rapidly changing industrial society. In this idealised, secure, deferential, rural world social hierarchy and position were clearly defined. Historian Peter Mandler has noted the substantial historiography on this late Victorian historical construct, in which 'Englishness' is identified as 'the squirearchical village of Southern or "Deep" England as the template on which the national character had been

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[245] References to Irving's 'dominating personality' and 'character' were frequently repeated in written accounts of him. See, for example, Bram Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (London: William Heinemann, 1906), 243.

[246] Brereton, *The Life*, 2.

[247] Ibid.

formed'.[248] Brereton strengthened Irving's reputation posthumously by suggestively rooting his family in this sort of traditional setting.

Brereton's choice of words also served to aggrandise Irving's social background by suggesting that he came from a family of gentlemen farmers with a small landed estate and church with its 'memorials to the Brodribb family'. But any illustrious family members were at best a distant memory. Samuel and his siblings were tradesmen and minor farmers, occupations that positioned them in the lower middle class. Furthermore, Irving's father was on a downward rather than an upward trajectory socially, and their domestic circumstances demonstrated this when they were living in Keinton in cramped conditions with a working-class family. Despite his obvious financial struggles Samuel did not appear to have taken any of the manual labour available in the village when they were living in Keinton, which suggests that he positioned himself socially above manual labourers.

In Cornwall Irving lived amongst the maternal Cornish branch of his lower middle-class family. His aunt Sarah Behenna (b.1801) had married Isaac Penberthy (1796-1849) in 1830 in Uny-Lelant, the village in which all the Behenna siblings were born, four miles from St Ives. Isaac and Sarah had three surviving children, all of similar age to Irving: Isaac (b.1830), Sarah (b. 1836) and John (b.1840). By the time that Irving came to live with the Penberthys in Cornwall in 1843, they were residing in Halse Town, a new planned mining village laid out in 1830, situated just a couple of miles from St Ives.[249] Isaac was a mine captain, managing several tin mines in the local area. Mine captains did not finance or own mines, but rather were sophisticated foremen, with responsibility for the day-to-day running of the mines. They were not hereditary positions: captains were promoted from the ranks of miners after they had worked in the mines for many years and had developed extensive knowledge of mining.[250] Captains needed to have some level of

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[248] Peter Mandler, 'Against "Englishness": English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850-1940', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 7 (1997): 155–75.

[249] TNA 1841 EWS Census HO107/144/7/37/20. On Halse Town see Jeremy Lake, Jo Cox, and Eric Berry, *Diversity and Vitality: The Methodist and Nonconformist Chapels of Cornwall* (Truro: Cornwall County Council, Archaeological Unit, 2001).

[250] Roger Burt, ed., *Cornish Mining: Essays on the Organisation of Cornish Mines and the Cornish Mining Economy* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1969); John Leifchild, *Cornwall: Its Mines and Miners*, 1855.

education in maths, mineralogy and engineering in order carry out mine surveying. Two nineteenth-century visitors to Cornwall observed of mine captains:

> [A] stranger is instantly at home in the presence of these men, and, in proportion to his own attainments, is frequently highly gratified with the vigour of their intellects, the readiness of their calculations, the extent of their scientific acquirements, and their mathematical knowledge.[251]

Clearly mine captains were regarded as respectable men who were educated to a certain extent, although like other Cornish miners, their knowledge tended to be self-taught in adulthood in preparation for the job.[252] This reflected practices of education in both rural and urban working- and lower middle-class communities, a subject I will examine later. Because of their position of authority mine captains were regarded as higher in the social scale than miners, but essentially they had come from the ranks of manual labourers.[253]

In order to combat criticism from a Victorian public highly conscious of class hierarchies, Brereton lionised Irving's uncle in the 1883 biography. Isaac was a 'remarkable man' whose reputation was so great that two thousand miners attended his funeral.[254] He had become 'prosperous beyond expectation' as a tin miner whilst working in Mexico for three years, before returning to Cornwall to marry Irving's aunt.[255] Whatever his acquired wealth was, Isaac's income as mine captain alone would have allowed the family to rent a large house in Halse Town, the details of which appear in a classified advert he posted in *The Royal Cornwall Gazette* in 1845:

> Eligible Shop, House and Garden, Halse Town, Borough of St. Ives, To be let by tender, and entered upon as soon as convenient, a NEW SHOP 18 by 15, Adapted to the drapery and grocery business; with the whole or part of a Dwelling House, now in the occupation of Capt Isaac Penberthy and consisting of a Parlour, Sitting-

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[251] Hitchins and Drew, *The History of Cornwall* (Helston, 1824) quoted in A.K.H. Jenkin, *The Cornish Miner*, Third ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), 230.

[252] Thomas Oliver, *Autobiography of a Cornish Miner* (Camborne: The Camborne Printing and Stationery Co Ltd, 1914); Charles Thomas, *Methodism and Self-Improvement in Nineteenth-Century Cornwall*, Occasional Publications 9 (Redruth: Cornish Methodist Historical Association, 1965).

[253] Thomas Shaw, *A History of Cornish Methodism* (Truro: Bradford Barton, 1967).

[254] I have not been able to verify this claim despite searches in local Cornish press.

[255] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 2–3.

> room, five bed-rooms, two large Closets, Kitchen, Back-kitchen, convenient Out-houses, with Kitchen Garden.[256]

This was certainly a step up in level and size of accommodation from the two rooms that Irving had been living in with his parents in Keinton Mandeville. And its size, larger than the basic and frequently overcrowded accommodation of regular miners, reflected Isaac's slightly elevated social status as a mine captain.[257] It is not known whether the family were using the shop in 1845, but in the 1851 census Sarah Penberthy's occupation is listed as a 'grocer'.[258] If Sarah was operating as a shopkeeper whilst Irving was living with them, it is not mentioned in any biographies of Irving and is perhaps indicative of Irving's desire to keep this aspect of his background hidden: by the late nineteenth century elite writers were parodying shop-keeping along with other lower middle-class occupations such as clerical work, portraying them as socially insignificant.[259] It is not clear why Isaac and his family needed to move from this house or if they managed to find new tenants. Perhaps Isaac was being hit by the downturn in the price of tin following Robert Peel's abolition of import duties on foreign tin-ores in early 1843.[260] But if the Penberthys were suffering financially, it was not so great as to warrant sending Irving back to live with his parents. Isaac was clearly a successful, hard-working man of some standing in his community and for this reason Brereton focused on him rather than Samuel as a respectable parental figure in Irving's early years. Nevertheless, despite Isaac's status as a self-educated mine captain, he still lived and worked amongst manual labourers.

Irving was steeped from an early age in the culture of Methodism, which dominated the local area. The oldest Methodist society in Cornwall was at St Ives, set up following a visit from the founder of Methodism, John Wesley (1703-1791), who had been invited there by a religious group in 1743. Methodism in Cornwall went through a period of natural growth, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century as the

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[256] *The Royal Cornwall Gazette,* 14 March, 1845.

[257] Jenkin, *Cornish Miner*; Leifchild, *Cornwall*.

[258] TNA 1851 EWS Census HO107/1917/360/21.

[259] Peter Bailey, 'White Collars, Gray Lives? The Lower Middle Class Revisited', *Journal of British Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 273–90.

[260] Rowe, *Cornwall*.

population of Cornwall increased, and had become the dominant religious force in the county over the course of the intervening century.[261] In the religious census of 1851, 49% of Cornwall's total population were in attendance at church on the morning of 30 March (174,611); 32% were Methodists (113,510).[262]

Although some members of the Methodist church came from polite society, as a general rule the lower middle and working classes dominated its membership. This was certainly the case in Cornwall, where Methodism had a very strong presence amongst the mining communities. No Anglican church was ever built in Halse Town, even when it was created as a separate parish from St Ives in 1846, suggesting that the Church of England had no presence there.[263] By 1832 Halse Town had two Methodist chapels: a Wesleyan chapel with seats for 310 members, and the Ebenezer Chapel (Bible Christian) with seats for 140; another chapel, the Wesleyan Teetotal chapel with seats for 130, was founded in 1845.[264] The Penberthys were a deeply religious family. In Brereton's 1908 biography Irving is quoted as stating that: 'My aunt was a teetotaller and a Methodist, and her whole life was coloured by her convictions.'[265] Interestingly, Irving's Methodist roots are played down in the 1883 biography, published at the height of his fame, as though polite readers, attentive to the subtleties of religious sects and class, might use this to question his status.

Irving's education was, like the majority of children living in Cornwall in the first half of the nineteenth century, limited and piecemeal. A similar picture of educational provision existed across the country at this time. Before 1870 when the Elementary Education Act required local districts to provide a school place for every child by setting up rate-aided board schools where necessary, most children's education was dependent

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[261] Shaw, *History*; Michael Edwards, *The Divisions of Cornish Methodism: 1802 to 1857*, Occasional Publications 7 (Redruth: Cornish Methodist Historical Association, 1964).

[262] Shaw, *History*, 96.

[263] Lake, Cox, and Berry, *Diversity and Vitality*.

[264] 'Chapels Part 3—St. Ives, Marazion & Hayle Methodist Circuits' *West Penrith Resources*: http://west-penwith.org.uk/wpenchp2.htm [accessed 11 June, 2015].

[265] Brereton, *The Life*, 7.

on charitable and religious institutions.[266] In 1808 the British and Foreign School Society was established to provide cheap elementary education to children of the poor. In 1811 the National Society for the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church was set up to rival the non-denominational British and Foreign School Society, and became the main school provider for children by the mid-nineteenth century: by 1851 there were 17,000 National Schools and 1,500 British Schools.[267] But there were no National or British schools in Halse Town in the 1840s when Irving was living there, and although there was a National school two miles away in St Ives, it was for girls only.[268] Cheap education for working- and lower middle-class families might also be obtained from Charity Schools, although there were only a small number of these, which had been set up for the education of the poor with endowments from benevolent founders in previous centuries. There was a charity school in St Ives, but there is no evidence that Irving attended this. Even Methodist schools, which had started to appear across the country to provide inexpensive education for the children of the poor, came too late for Irving's elementary education in Cornwall. These schools gradually started to appear in Cornwall during the 1840s, but it wasn't until 1852 that St Ives had a Wesleyan day school.[269]

Information about Irving's education in Cornwall is limited, and again the 1883 biography moves past the subject quickly: 'At Halsetown [sic] Irving passed his early years getting the best teaching which the place offered.'[270] This certainly put a positive gloss on what was likely to have been a very basic education. Autobiographies of nineteenth-century Cornish miners, recalling their education in these years, indicate that a mix of dame schooling, Sunday School at chapel and small private schools were the sources of education for most children in these communities. In the private sector, dame schools and private day schools were a cheap option for parents, combining a basic level of

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[266] Keith Evans, *The Development and Structure of the English School System* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985); David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[267] General Register Office, *Education in Great Britain. Being the Official Report of H. Mann.* (London: Routledge and Co, 1854).

[268] *Pigot's Directory of Cornwall* (London: James Pigot & Co., 1844).

[269] *Slater's Royal National and Commercial Directory and Topography of the Counties of Berkshire, Cornwall Etc.* (London: Isaac Slater, 1852).

[270] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 5.

education in literacy and more flexible practical arrangements for payment, pick up and drop off times and proximity to the home. Sunday Schools also provided basic free elementary education and were widely attended because they did not interfere with children's working lives: it is estimated that by the mid-nineteenth century around two-thirds of all children aged between 5 and 15 were attending Sunday School.[271] In Cornwall, where children tended to start their working lives at the age of eight or nine, Sunday School was a convenient part-time educational institution.

Some indication of the type of education Irving might have received is indicated in the autobiographies of men who grew up at the same time in similar mining communities. In his autobiography, the Cornish miner John Harris described his educational experiences.[272] Harris was born in 1820 in Camborne, just over ten miles from St Ives. His father leased a small farm of seven or eight acres, and was also a tribute copper miner at Dolcoath. Harris first went to Sunday School when he was four or five at a chapel where his father was the teacher. He also went to a dame school, with seven children, where he learnt the alphabet. Harris then went to a private school where the teacher was a former miner who had had a disabling leg injury. On the quality of his teaching Harris remarked:

> In those days any shattered being wrecked in the mill or the mine, if he could read John Bunyan, count fifty backwards, and scribble the squire's name, was considered good enough for a pedagogue; and when he could do nothing else, was established behind a low desk in a school. I do not think John Robert's acquirements extended far beyond reading, writing and arithmetic; and I doubt if he knew what the word geography meant… His seminary was a thatched house by the road-side, in a poorly-cultivated district.[273]

At this school Harris improved his reading and learnt to write and spell, and to multiply money, but clearly this was not an education of any substantial quality. Harris commented on the importance of his scriptural education, however, and this formed a large part of the elementary education of children in the Cornish mining communities. At

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[271] Phil Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England: The People's Education* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

[272] John Harris, *My Autobiography* (London: Hamilton, Adams and Co, 1882).

[273] Ibid., 25.

the age of nine Harris's formal education was over and he was put to work in the fields, and then shortly afterwards in the mines. Another miner Thomas Oliver, born five miles from St Ives in Ludgvan in 1830, also recalled dame school and Sunday School in his autobiography:

> I remember being taught my letters in an old dame's school. Her husband was a cobbler… For my reading I am indebted to the Wesleyan Sunday School. I remember when I was in what was then called the Testament class that I could read fairly well… I am certain, had it not been for Sunday School I could not have had anything of an education until I was able to get money to pay for it. My parents were poor and unable to give me any of the beginning of an education except a little writing that my father used to set for me on a slate.[274]

Oliver also started his working life very early, helping his older brother in the mines at the age of eight. Their accounts indicate the central role of the Methodist church, which was steeped in ideas of self-making and in providing basic education for the working population of Cornwall.

It is likely that Irving had a very similar education to that of Harris and Oliver: a mix of dame schooling and Sunday School. Very little evidence survives of dame schools in Cornwall, as they were privately run, usually by women, and often in the person's home; they were not subject to registration and inspection as schools were later on. An account written thirty years after Irving's death by a member of the Old Cornwall Society gives some details about Irving's early years in Halse Town.[275] Although the information is hard to verify, many of the details do not appear in any earlier accounts of Irving's life and suggest local knowledge of the family and eye witness accounts gleaned from locals who encountered Irving on one of his occasional return visits to Cornwall after he had become a famous actor. For example, the writer says that on one occasion Irving visited with Ellen Terry 'whom my informant briefly describes as "a fat woman"'. Specific details such as this give some credibility to the information contained in the article. In this account Irving was sent to a dame school in Halse Town kept by 'a Miss Penberthy', who was likely to have been related to Isaac Penberthy. Parents were inclined to send their

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[274] Oliver, *Autobiography*, 7–8.

[275] Daisy Giles, 'Sir Henry Irving at Halsetown [sic]', *Journal of the Old Cornwall Society* 2, no. VII (April 1934): 20.

children to dame schools run by known and trusted relatives or friends. The account offers a vivid insight into what Irving's experiences with Miss Penberthy might have been like:

> The schoolroom was the parlour of the Cottage, and the children when entering the back door would throw their outdoor clothes on the stairs which led up from the kitchen, and then pass on to the front room. Only the rudiments of the "three R's" were taught and the school was kept in a very free-and-easy manner, the scholars' studies often being broken into by their mistress's domestic duties, or by her need for water or wood, which they were detailed to fetch.[276]

Irving's dame schooling enabled him to learn reading, writing and arithmetic, but it was very basic schooling mixed in with household chores. As with many other dame schools, the education of children fitted around the practicalities of housework. We have no information about Irving at Sunday School, but it would be unusual if he had not attended.

Like Harris and Oliver, Irving's access to books was limited. The books in their homes were typical of the literature commonly found in the homes of the labouring poor in the 1830s and 1840s.[277] In both the accounts from Oliver and Harris, they recollect that the bible was one of the very few books they had access to as children. The bible was the only text that Harris's father read, although he gave his son a copy of *Robinson Crusoe*. Oliver had 'a few halfpenny books such as Jack the Giant Killer' which formed his library until the Wesleyan Church centenary year (1839) when 'all the scholars that could read fairly well were presented with a little book of rhyme'.[278] Irving's 1883 biography states that 'the boy's fancy was fed by the few books allowed in the house by the religious teaching of the time and place. The Bible, a volume of old English Ballads, and 'Don Quixote', formed the library.'[279]

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[276] Ibid.

[277] Vincent, *Literacy*; Richard D Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, 2nd ed (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998).

[278] Oliver, *Autobiography*, 8.

[279] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 5.

Despite these limited resources and dearth of formal education, ideas about self-improvement were strong in the Methodist community in which Irving lived.[280] Subjects of study for adults tended to focus on occupational and religious learning, and sometimes the acquirement of 'useful knowledge' such as anthropology, geography and history.[281] John Harris recalled that after working twelve-hour days in the mines he would come home and study. He would look up the meanings of words that he read and didn't understand, would write them down on slips of paper and learn them whilst travelling to work. He would take every opportunity to improve his knowledge, including making use of the Sunday School library and paying close attention to members of the community who could be relied on for correct pronunciation of words.[282] Eventually Harris started to publish poetry in Wesleyan magazines, and became a Sunday School teacher. Thomas Oliver also recalled working long shifts down the mine before going to school 'with a dirty face and hands'.[283] He continued to attend formal lessons whilst working, gaining knowledge of maths, mensuration, geometry, algebra, comic sections and the specific gravities of substance. When Oliver left school he continued his studies at home, and started learning trigonometry, land surveying and mine surveying. Eventually he put his name down as a preacher for the Methodist church. Both Harris and Oliver remained miners all their lives. Their self-improvement was motivated by the desire to enhance their career prospects, to express themselves and to share their knowledge with others through teaching and preaching.[284]

Irving's immediate circle provided him with role models who demonstrated the value of self-improvement. Living with the Penberthys in 1841 was a 'school master', John Victor (1819-1894), aged twenty-one, who would have had a similar education to Harris and Oliver.[285] Victor was born in Sancreed, ten miles from Halse Town, and his father was a tin miner. He later became a Wesleyan Minister of the Gospel at Copse Road Chapel in Clevedon near Bristol, but at this stage had probably travelled to the new Halse

[280] Thomas, *Methodism*.

[281] On occupational learning in the long nineteenth century see David Vincent, *Literacy*, chapter 4.

[282] Harris, *My Autobiography*, 76.

[283] Oliver, *Autobiography*, 17.

[284] Thomas, *Methodism*.

[285] TNA 1841 EWS Census HO107/144/7/37/20.

Town community in order to preach in the Wesleyan chapel there and had stayed to become the local Sunday School teacher. It is likely that Victor had an educational influence on the Penberthy children, although by the time he left Halse Town and moved to Bristol in 1845, taking Irving's aunt Jane Behenna as his wife, Irving had only been living with the Penberthys for a year or so. Nevertheless, Victor was part of Irving's early social milieu from which he was imbibing ideas about what was possible and how he could construct his identity. It is likely Victor had some influence on Irving. Firstly, Victor was typical of the young men steeped in Methodist ideas about the need for intellectual self-improvement at this time. These ideas remained with Irving into his adolescent years, as I will demonstrate in chapter three. Secondly, Victor showed Irving what could be achieved through that self-improvement: the possibility of leaving the tin-mining community even though he had come from a family of tin-miners himself. Because of Victor's connection with Irving through marriage, he remained an active part of the Brodribb family's lives. The 1861 census reveals that Irving's mother Mary was staying with Victor and his wife (her sister) in Bristol.[286] By this stage John Victor was doing well financially and socially: he had a servant and a governess for his children. It is likely, therefore, that he remained a constant reminder to Irving throughout his teens of what was possible to achieve.

Victor's mobility stood in sharp contrast to the relative immobility of the rest of the Cornish community amongst whom Irving lived during his childhood. There were many Penberthys living in Halse Town at this time, most of who were in tin mining also. His cousin John Penberthy (1840-1914) followed in Isaac's footsteps, eventually becoming a mining engineer.[287] The men on the maternal side of Irving's Cornish family were either skilled craftsmen or were in trade: his uncle Joshua Behenna (1805-1864) became an innkeeper in St Ives, whilst another uncle Thomas Behenna (1816-1899) was a carpenter living in Halse Town.[288] Uncles by marriage were either also in tin mining or in trade. Had Irving remained in Cornwall with the Penberthys, his future prospects would have been limited to tin mining or trade. But what John Victor had demonstrated was that the Methodist church could offer another potential occupation and a different kind

[286] TNA 1861 ESW Census RG09/1709/20/19.

[287] TNA 1891 ESW Census RG12/1846/20/3.

[288] TNA 1851 ESW Census HO107/1917/467/15.

of life. One later biographical account suggests that Irving was good at public speaking from an early age and that his aunt wanted him to become a preacher, so it is possible he had already started to imagine a life away from his Cornish kin.[289] But the death of his uncle Isaac on the 18 February 1849 changed Irving's life for good.[290] With no breadwinner to support the family, an extra child was no longer an option for the Penberthy household. Whatever the financial situation of his parents was, Irving headed to London to join them, at the age of eleven.

The time Irving spent in Cornwall amongst his tin-mining kin had to be acknowledged in his 1883 biography because it was where he spent the majority of his childhood years. But Brereton's words worked to combat the negative impression that this background in a labouring community might suggest to a class-conscious public, by presenting Irving's childhood in Cornwall in romantic terms:

> Cornwall is essentially a county of romance. Every rock has its name and story, every hill its gnome, every well its sprite. A love of the 'eerie' distinguishes young and old. One of the pranks of the mischievous in Halse Town was what they called 'guise-dancing,' a wild riot in masks and mummery in which the villagers entered one another's houses, and frightened the children who were in bed. Ghost stories were told with great relish, especially by an ancient dame nearly a century old, who liked to terrify little Irving… in the midst of this wild county, full of natural beauty, and quick with fancies and legends in a circle where the duties of life were set out straight from the Bible with the memory of a mother far away, and vivid recollections of parting and loneliness, the poetical instincts of young Henry Irving became first awakened.[291]

Accounts of mid-nineteenth century Cornwall by authors such as Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) had depicted it as a wild county, a way of life from a bye-gone era, and Brereton no doubt tapped into this idea in the cultural imagination.[292] But also visible in this poetic and fantasized depiction of Irving's roots in Cornwall are contemporary Victorian ideas about natural history and Darwinism. Literary historian Gillian Beer has demonstrated

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[289] Giles, 'Sir Henry Irving'.

[290] TNA 1849 BMDP Records, Lelant Parish Church, Cornwall, Cornwall Memorial Inscriptions ref 465.

[291] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 4–5.

[292] Wilkie Collins, *Rambles beyond Railways; or, Notes in Cornwall Taken a-Foot* (London: Richard Bentley, 1851).

how influential and pervasive Darwin's ideas about evolutionary theory and the interdependence of biology and geology were on nineteenth-century culture.[293] In this extract Irving was positioned as a natural-born artist, whose 'instincts' only needed to be 'awakened' by communion with the rugged, wild Cornish landscape, as he roamed over its rocks and hills. It is possible to read Darwin's idea of the 'survival of the fittest' in this passage in which Brereton presented Irving as an individual who had learnt to be self-sufficient from a young age in an unforgiving landscape and in the face of parental absence. It also suggested the evolution of cultural beliefs, evoking a bye-gone scene in which pagan stories from a superstitious community were once prevalent. Brereton distanced Irving from this paganism, positioning him as a Christian man whose moral grounding was taken from the bible rather than folklore. Irving was depicted as taking all that was good from this primitive culture and none of the ignorance. For the Victorian play-going public, familiar with the many dreamy and mysterious characters of Irving's repertoire such as Mathias in *The Bells*, this vivid evocation of his childhood experiences in Cornwall would have fuelled the aura of the romantic bohemian artist that surrounded Irving in the 1880s. Furthermore, the three books that Brereton states Irving had access to further associated Irving's character with positive Victorian cultural ideas: the heritage of Englishness (old English ballads), romance and chivalry (*Don Quixote*) and upstanding morals (the bible). In his careful construction of these myths, Brereton once again turned what could have been a considerable weakness of Irving's background into an advantage. And this romantic description of Irving's Cornish roots was repeated again and again in later accounts of his life.[294]

Furthermore, Brereton focused on the status of Isaac Penberthy as a mine captain and the devout nature of Irving's aunt. By omitting the harsher realities of life in a tin-mining community Brereton presented Irving's background in a respectable light. It became part of the myth of Irving's rise to fame that the wild landscape of Cornwall enabled his young imagination to roam freely. The reality of it, however, was that the community of Halse Town was working-class, dirty, poorly educated, superstitious, parochial and uncultured. Had he stayed there, Irving would probably have lived a similar

[293] Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).

[294] See, for example, 'Henry Irving's Birthplace', *The Era*, Saturday 6 Nov, 1897.

life to his wider kin. Brereton skilfully depicted Irving as a 'diamond in the rough', a natural-born artistic genius destined for greatness from childhood, whose romantic spirit was heightened by the wild landscape of rural England.

The fact that Irving was forced to be geographically mobile from an early age by circumstances beyond his control was significant, I suggest, for his potential for social mobility. He had already moved from his birthplace in Keinton Mandeville to Bristol, and then to rural life in Cornwall. Now Irving was about to experience another major shift by moving to London. During his time in Cornwall he had witnessed the relocation of John Victor to Bristol. Although it is impossible to know his feelings about his seven-year separation from his parents, it is likely to have had an impact on his sense of self, identity and connection to place. It is unlikely that his parents visited him very frequently, if at all, in Cornwall during his childhood years. Cornwall was a difficult location to access in the 1840s when Irving was there. Even In the mid-1850s one writer claimed that English tourists were more likely to travel abroad than to Cornwall due to its relative inaccessibility.[295] Improvements in road networks through turnpike trusts were piecemeal in the first half of the nineteenth century, and similarly piecemeal was the development of the railways – it was not until 1859 that Cornwall was connected to the national network. Irving's parents were far away in a big city and it is possible he had dreamt of joining them one day in London. If he did imagine a life elsewhere during these formative childhood years this might also have contributed to Irving's capacity to move easily into different communities and circles during his adulthood years. Furthermore, Irving's early exposure to the self-improving ethos and structure of Methodism gave him a basic education and potentially an aspiration for self-advancement. Thus the circumstances and experiences of Irving's boyhood provided the latent possibility for his later social mobility. In the final part of this chapter I suggest that Irving's experiences in London during his teenage years also contributed to this possibility.

[295] Leifchild, *Cornwall.*

Irving's move to London

It is impossible to know what effect the dramatic overnight alteration in Irving's circumstances had on his mind when he moved from the remote countryside of Cornwall to London for the first time at the age of eleven in 1849. Although he had lived in Bristol as a child, the sheer magnitude of London in terms of physical size and population was on a different scale entirely.[296] In Brereton's 1883 biography he acknowledged these changed circumstances: 'From this life of health and hope, of loneliness and picturesque beauty, the change to the stifling air and prosaic surroundings of the London streets was abrupt.'[297] This was something of an understatement. London was the largest city in Europe in the mid nineteenth century. Contemporary accounts from the time when Irving moved there provide a picture of the conditions of the city he would have experienced. In a passage from *London Labour and the London Poor*, first published in 1851, the journalist Henry Mayhew (1812-1887) described what a stranger to the city would have encountered:

> Struck as he is with the dense throng of people who crowd along London Bridge, Fleet Street, Cheapside, Holborn, Oxford Street and the Strand, perhaps no sight makes a more striking impression on his mind than the brilliant gaiety of Regent Street and the Haymarket. It is not only the architectural splendour of the aristocratic streets in that neighbourhood, but the brilliant illumination of the shops, cafes, Turkish divans, assembly halls, and concert rooms, and the troops of elegantly dressed courtesans, rustling in silks and satins, and waving in laces, promenading along these superb streets among throngs of fashionable people, and persons apparently of every order and pursuit, from the ragged crossing-sweeper and tattered shoe-black to the high-bred gentleman of fashion and scion of nobility.[298]

Writing in the 1850s, another journalist George Augustus Sala (1828-1895) vividly evoked the foul smell of London in his book *Twice Round the Clock*: 'The fumes of the vilest of tobacco, of decaying vegetables… of escaping (and frequently surreptitiously tapped) gas,

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[296] Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century: 'A Human Awful Wonder of God'* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007); Liza Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City, 1840-1870* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005); Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens' London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012).

[297] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 5.

[298] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* vol IV (1862) in Peter Quennell, ed., *London's Underworld* (London: Spring Books, 1960), 38–39.

of deceased cats, of ancient fish… of dubious mutton pies, and of the unwashed, unkempt, reckless humanity; all these make the night hideous and the heart sick.'[299] The crowds, the architecture, the smells and the noise would have been new and disorientating to Irving.

We can get a sense of the mix of excited and fearful feelings of a boy of Irving's age arriving in mid-century London for the first time through Dickens's semi-autobiographical fictional character David Copperfield, published in 1850:

> What an amazing place London was to me when I saw it in the distance, and I believed all the adventures of my favourite heroes to be constantly enacting and re-enacting there, and I vaguely made it out to be fuller of wonders and wickedness than all the cities of the earth.[300]

Copperfield describes the dizzying effect of coming into this maelstrom for the first time: 'We went on through a great noise and uproar that confused my weary head beyond description'.[301] Perhaps Irving felt the same as he arrived in London. Certainly it was necessary for him to accustom himself quickly to change. Irving's early experiences were teaching him to be resilient, and this was a quality he demonstrated in adulthood.

Irving's home life in London was characteristic of the lower middle class. Irving's father had found work as a clerk, but as with other aspects of Irving's family life, Samuel's occupation was not mentioned in any of his biographies.[302] This suggests that the kind of clerical work that Samuel was undertaking was low-grade. Different kinds of clerical work existed in the mid nineteenth century. At the top of the scale, the Civil Service offered respectable employment for gentlemen, and incomes could be lucrative and influential above entry level. In business and law there were two grades of clerks: those who were articled (and therefore paid their employer to learn all aspects of the business) and ordinary clerks. The latter were at the bottom of the scale and were paid a wage for

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[299] G.A. Sala, *Twice Round the Clock; or, The Hours of the Day and Night in London* (London: Houlston and Wright, 1862), 274.

[300] Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 122.

[301] Ibid., 55. On the noise of London see John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[302] TNA 1851 EWS Census HO107/1532/19/12.

menial tasks such as filing, correspondence, basic bookkeeping and other routine office jobs; there was little prospect of promotion in these jobs.[303] It is likely that this was the kind of work Samuel was doing.

The outward-facing respectability of ordinary clerical work as opposed to manual labour, and its increasing availability in large towns and cities in the nineteenth century made it an occupation that both attracted the lower middle class and shaped their vision of themselves. It was necessary for ordinary clerks to have a certain level of education (competent arithmetic, reading and handwriting), to wear clothing appropriate to the office (difficult for those on limited means) and to project a degree of respectability in manners and comportment. But it was low-paid and often barely enabled the maintenance of respectable standards. Evidence for the working life of London clerks in the 1850s is scant and has to be gleaned from novels and the occasional pamphlet or manual of instruction. Writing in 1852, J.S. Harrison argued in one such pamphlet for the increase in wages for ordinary clerks, who were barely able to maintain themselves as single men on their meagre incomes, let alone a wife and children, and yet were expected to be educated and respectable in their self-presentation, interests, and home lives.[304] He argued that ordinary clerical wages were so low that servants were no longer an option for most, that wives were required to do all the housework, and that it was often necessary for married couples to look for additional income from other sources. Indeed poverty was always a very real risk for clerical workers, it being 'one branch of the middle class for the most part so circumstanced, as that its deterioration and absorption into the lower class are imminent.'[305] This ordinary clerical work distinguished people in the vulgar majority in terms of social status, being as Harrison noted 'of a more enlightening and improving nature than manual work'. [306] But it did not necessarily separate them economically: historian David Lockwood estimates that salaries for clerks

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[303] Francis Davenant, *What Shall My Son Be? Hints to Parents on the Choice of a Profession or Trade; and Counsels to Young Men on their Entrance into Active Life* (London: S.W. Partridge & Co, 1870); David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958).

[304] J.S. Harrison, *The Social Position and Claims of Book-Keepers and Clerks Considered* (London, 1852). A similar argument is made 25 years later in Charles Parsons, *Clerks: Their Position and Advancement* (London, 1876).

[305] Harrison, *Social Position*, 21.

[306] Ibid.

could be as low as twenty pounds per annum.[307] John Tosh has suggested that £300 a year was the minimum needed to maintain solid middle-class respectability in the nineteenth century.[308]

This description of living standards for ordinary clerks certainly matched Samuel Brodribb's circumstances in the 1850s. In the 1851 census Samuel was living with his wife and son on the top floor of 68 Old Broad Street, close to London Wall in the City of London.[309] In the 1850s the City of London was the legal, business and commercial centre of the metropolis, and was a home for working people. Census records indicate that the Brodribbs' neighbours were from a similar socio-economic group: on one side was living a housekeeper, on the other a victualler. The Brodribbs had no live-in servant or housemaid, suggesting that the income of the house was not plentiful. Staying with them at the time was a 'visitor', Joseph Acbil, whose occupation was listed as 'commission traveller' – in other words, a travelling salesman. This could have been a contact that Samuel had made during his time on the road as a commercial traveller, but it is more probable that he was a paying guest.[310] Although Mary had no occupation listed in the census, Brereton's 1908 biography of Irving states that she was a 'caretaker of the offices over which she and her son lived'.[311] The additional income derived both from caretaking and from renting out rooms suggests financial strains in the Brodribb household. But it also points to the Brodribbs' social status: the ability to ring-fence the privacy of the family home indicated polite status in the nineteenth century. This housekeeping aspect is confirmed in the 1861 census, when Samuel was still living at the same address, and listed his occupation as 'Auctioneer Clerk and House Keeper'.[312] Staying with them in 1861 was another 'visitor', James Allen, an inspector for the Railway Coal Department, evidence again that the Brodribbs were seeking additional income from renting rooms as

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[307] Lockwood, *Blackcoated*, 23.

[308] John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 12.

[309] TNA 1851 EWS Census HO107/1532/19/12. 'Top floor' detail is provided in Brereton, *The Life*, 9.

[310] On the fine line in the definition between lodger and visitor see Leonore Davidoff, 'The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century England', in *Fit Work For Women*, ed. Sandra Burman (London: Croom Helm, 1979). On landladies in the mid-Victorian period see also Alison C. Kay, 'A Little Enterprise of Her Own: Lodging-House Keeping and the Accommodation Business in Nineteenth-Century London', *The London Journal* 28, no. 2 (1 November 2003): 41–53.

[311] Brereton, *The Life*, 11.

[312] TNA 1861 EWS Census RG09/229/5/8.

they struggled to make ends comfortably meet from Samuel's wage as a clerk alone. It is worth speculating what the effect of this living arrangement was on the young Irving. The flux of lodgers coming and going, the lack of a permanent and private unit in the family home, and the continual contact with the outside world through exposure to new cultural ideas from transient, mobile individuals might well have engendered a sense of geographical mobility in Irving and an ability to adapt in the presence of strangers that contributed to the potential for his social mobility.

The fact that Samuel's occupation in London was not discussed in Irving's biographies suggests that it was an aspect of Irving's family about which he wished to keep strategically silent. Samuel's occupation was a potential source of embarrassment to Irving in the polite society in which he was moving in the 1880s when his first biography was published. By the late nineteenth century elite opinion about lower middle-class clerical work was derisive. There were several reasons for this. During the second half of the nineteenth century the number of clerks rose from 12,310 in 1851 to 103,414 in 1901. This volume of clerical workers inevitably diluted any prestige that might once have been attached to the occupation. Furthermore, the Victorian education system was not equipped to deal with the specialised training that was increasingly required of clerical workers as the century progressed. Because of the growing complexities of business practice there was less opportunity to train boys informally on the job. Lower middle-class parental expectations about the role of education, discussed further in chapter three, also served to keep clerical educational standards low. Debates increasingly circulated about Britain's competitiveness in an international business market precisely because of the poor standard of education that clerical workers had. This served to further lower the prestige and value of clerks.[313]

Literary conventions for representing lower middle-class men by the end of the century contributed to the view in polite society that this stratum should be regarded with contempt. The clerk was the archetypal occupation in these representations, and his construction as a crass social parvenu was established early on in the Victorian period with publications such as *Punch's Guide to Servants: The Clerk* (1846) and Albert Smith's

[313] Lockwood, *Blackcoated*; Margaret Bryant, *The London Experience of Secondary Education* (London: Athlone, 1986).

The Natural History of the Gent (1847). Despite the appearance of honest, generous and hard-working Dickensian figures such as the clerk Bob Cratchit in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), the literary convention for representing commercial clerks was largely negative. Writing in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1862, barrister and writer James Fitzjames Stephen (1829-1894) sneered at the pretensions and lack of gentility of commercial clerks, shopkeepers and commercial travellers:

> A gentleman and a labouring man would tell the same story in nearly the same words, differently pronounced, of course, and arranged in the one case grammatically, and in the other not… The language of the commercial clerk, and the manner in which he brings it out, are both framed on quite a different model. He thinks about himself and constantly tries to talk fine… The manners of a sailor, a commissioned officer in the army, a game-keeper, or the better kind of labourers… are much better in themselves, and are capable of a far higher polish, than the manners of a bagman or a small shopkeeper.[314]

Stephen's view here was that the labouring classes had more in common with gentlemen than the lower-middle stratum he described. It was clear to Stephen what the difference was between men like him and the commercial clerks and travellers of the lower middle class – men like Samuel Brodribb. Conscious of this criticism levelled at clerks in late Victorian Britain, the author of *The Clerk: A Sketch in Outline of his Duties and Principles* advised young men setting out in their careers to be sober in the way they speak, dress and behave.[315] By the late nineteenth century the conventional representation of the commercial clerk as comical, pretentious, snobbish, ignorant and insignificant was deep-rooted, seen in characters such as Mr Pooter in George Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* (1892). Literary historian Arlene Young argues that the bourgeoisie was attempting to define its members against the lower middle class through these belittling representations.[316] The clerk was at the forefront of this criticism, Young argues, because he was 'the most visible and rapidly proliferating lower middle-class type during the Victorian period'.[317] Distancing himself, therefore, from his father's occupation by

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[314] James Fitzjames Stephen, 'Gentlemen', *Cornhill Magazine* 5 (1862): 337.

[315] *The Clerk: A Sketch in Outline of His Duties and Discipline* (London, 1878).

[316] Arlene Young, 'Virtue Domesticated: Dickens and the Lower Middle Class', *Victorian Studies* 39, no. 4 (1996): 483–511.

[317] Ibid., 485.

keeping his silence was perhaps a strategic move on Irving's part to deflect questions about his social status.

This did not, however, prevent rumours about Irving's father appearing in the press. A cartoon from an unknown periodical source likely to be from the 1870s presented Irving on stage as Hamlet (see figure 1, page 304). Hamlet says, 'Methinks I see my father!... In my mind's eye, Horatio!' Another cartoon follows with an image of a stooping elderly man ordering a drink at the counter of 'The Wellington' public house (see figure 2, page 305). The Lyceum Theatre was located on Wellington Street, and no doubt many readers understood the connection between the pub's name and Irving's theatre. The caricature plays on the scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* when the eponymous hero imagines he has seen his dead father. Transposed to Irving's own father, he sees a man in a public house. In this cartoon Samuel Brodribb is represented in the literary conventions of the clerk. Arlene Young argues that during the nineteenth century this representational convention developed into what she terms 'a semiotics of dress' consisting of 'frayed collars and cuffs, shiny pants, shabby boots, a tattered umbrella, and any signs of careful mending and patching'.[318] Samuel is represented here in the typical working garb of the late nineteenth-century clerk, looking shabby in a black overcoat and bowler hat and carrying an umbrella tucked under his arm. He is thin and scrawny, a sign of lack of food from low pay. Samuel's skin is wrinkly, and he is slightly stooping at the knees to suggest his age. His shoulders are also stooped, a characteristic often observed in older clerks who had spent years sitting on high stools, usually with no back, bent over their work.[319] The cartoon aimed to expose Irving's social origins by presenting a comical, exaggerated image of his father as an ordinary lower middle-class clerk.

As a prominent celebrity Irving was frequently a target for cartoonists, and his physiognomy lent itself easily to caricature. Although caricature is intended for amusement, it is also 'a blunt instrument for the expression of prejudices'.[320] Anthony

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[318] Ibid., 490.

[319] W. Warrell, *Scribes Ancient and Modern: Otherwise Law Writers or Scriveners* (London: Lindsey & Co, 1889).

[320] Richard Godfrey, 'Introduction', in *English Caricature: 1620 to the Present: Caricaturists and Satirists, Their Art, Their Purpose and Influence* (London: V&A Publications, 1984); Jim Davis, '"Auntie, Can You Do That?" Or "Ibsen in Brixton": Representing the Victorian Stage through Cartoon and Caricature', in *Ruskin, the Theatre and Victorian Visual Culture*, ed. Anselm Heinrich, Katherine Newey, and Jeffrey Richards

Wohl argues that exaggerated representations of Disraeli as a Jew in late nineteenth-century caricature claim to 'unmask' him by revealing the motivating forces behind his politics. But rather than being a frivolous satirical device Wohl suggests that they demonstrate widespread anti-semitic sentiment in their stereotype of the sinister Jew.[321] The cartoon of Irving and his father can be read in a similar way: the exaggerated stereotype of the down-at-heel lower middle-class clerk is an illustration of the class prejudices held by the Victorian elite towards the lower classes. It claims to 'unmask' Irving by revealing his class pretensions, but it can be read as revealing the widespread unease that many elite Victorians felt about the rapid rise and assimilation of lower middle-class men like Irving. The fact that Irving was the subject of cartoons like this was a sign of his prominence and influence in late-Victorian society. And it also reveals the contradictions in late Victorian society between the celebratory narrative of the self-made man and the snobbishness in polite society towards social climbers.

Conclusion

Irving's personality was inevitably moulded by his experiences in the local contexts in which he lived as a child, and this contributed to his ability to achieve what he did. Investigating Irving's family background and life in rural Cornwall has illuminated the social circumstances of and cultural ideas circulating in his early childhood. In these early years, Irving learnt the vulgar bodily practices and behaviour of his primary culture, the lower middle class. From an early age he was confined in the ascetic and culturally limited parameters of a Cornish tin-mining community. Self-improvement through adult education was a strong idea in this community, but not generally for the purposes of social mobility. However, individuals in his network possibly provided Irving with the imaginative fodder to conceive of a different life beyond Cornwall. And his geographical movement surely accustomed Irving to constant change and the necessity of learning to adapt in new contexts. Further, the physical distance between Irving and his parents in

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(Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 216–38; Paul Goldman and Simon Cooke, eds., *Reading Victorian Illustration, 1855-1875: Spoils of the Lumber Room* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

[321] Anthony S. Wohl, '"Ben JuJu": Representations of Disraeli's Jewishness in the Victorian Political Cartoon', *Jewish History* 10, no. 2 (1996): 89–134.

these formative years possibly contributed to the emotional resilience he demonstrated in later life.

One of the claims of this thesis is that a close look at the experiences of one individual can provide fresh perspectives on cultures of class in the Victorian period. What has emerged in this chapter from records of Irving's early life and other supporting contemporary sources is a picture of his background and childhood that is different from the portrait in the 1883 biography. Brereton wrote out of Irving's story the stark realities of his life. Instead he depicted Irving's family and life experiences in romantic language, and started to construct an image of Irving as a natural artistic genius with an imaginative and resilient personality who was destined for greatness. I have suggested that Irving felt compelled to present this picture because the polite used social origins to police the boundaries of their class. Chapter three moves on to explore Irving's experiences in his teenage years. I will demonstrate how class manifested in the Victorian schooling system, and the ways in which polite society used education as another way of policing its membership.

Chapter Three:
Irving's Adolescence

> Fine for not aspirating h's, whether in the beginning or in the middle of words such as house and behaviour.
> Exceptions: Honour, heir, honest, herb, hour, hostler, and their derivatives.
> Fine for misplacing the h such as hart for art.
> Fine for not giving the pure sound to the u as dooty for duty, toone for tune and the like.
> Exception: blue.
> Fine for omitting the g at the end of words, as shillin for shilling.
> Fine for saying jist for jest, jest for just, instid for instead and such like cockneyisms.
> Fine for using the singular number instead of the plural and all ungrammatical expressions.
> We, the undersigned, agree to pay the fine of one halfpenny for each breach of the foregoing rules and to appoint Mr. J.H. Brodribb as treasurer.
> (Signed) John Henry Brodribb
> (and five others).[322]

Whilst working at the publishing company Thacker & Co in 1856, Irving made a list of rules for correct speech for himself and the other young clerks in the office to adhere to. The language used in this note might have come straight out of the advice literature discussed in chapter one. It demonstrates Irving's growing understanding of the way language was spoken and how it should be articulated 'correctly'. The eighteen-year-old Irving was clearly conscious of his own accent and pronunciation of words, and was working hard to change it.

This chapter focuses on Irving's life in London as an adolescent, and considers another barrier to social mobility, his education. In the late nineteenth century when Irving was the unofficial head of the Victorian stage, education was increasingly being used as a marker of social class. Irving's limited education at a private commercial school was entirely consistent with other lower middle-class boys of his age, but it did not fit

[322] Bram Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (London: William Heinemann, 1906), 240.

with the particular kind of schooling and knowledge that characterised polite men. I will demonstrate how a snobbish elite used Irving's limited education to obliquely criticize and undermine him. Once again Brereton's 1883 biography of Irving presents a different perspective on his education and early working life. By maintaining strategic silences, telling half-truths, and manipulating information in certain ways, Irving presented his adolescent years in a respectable light in a bid to protect his reputation and deflect criticism of his social origins. The truth of Irving's adolescent experiences, as this chapter demonstrates through census data, Irving's letters to friends and family, and contemporary autobiographies, suggests another reality.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate once again the significance of the particular in historical analysis. As well as providing a local and social history which contributes to our knowledge of what it meant for an individual to live in a particular context in mid-Victorian Britain, the micro-level lens becomes increasingly important for observing how these local contexts had an impact on the conditioning of an individual's bodily practices and behaviour. Direct evidence of Irving's teenage years is limited so I make use of sources written by contemporaries, which suggest the kind of experiences Irving might also have had. The theme of self-making once again surfaces in this chapter. In the 1883 biography Irving is presented as a morally righteous and determined young man, striving against the odds, living ascetically and studying hard in his quest to become a great actor. In this way the biography presents a standard self-making narrative that suggested that hard work was the route to success. However, this tidy presentation of Irving's teenage years conceals other explanations for his later successes. The particular circumstances of Irving's life and the prevailing ideas and structures of the time in which he lived enabled this individual to elevate himself. The London context was crucial because it provided Irving with a wealth of institutions, cultural activities, and people to connect with. Influencing Irving during his youth were a number of men he encountered through the structures of home, school and chapel, and his wider kin. In these various urban settings Irving was exposed again to ideas that suggested the possibility of social and geographical movement, and what becomes clear is the importance of Irving's expanding social network in the construction of his sense of self and identity. I suggest that these early experiences were a factor in Irving's capacity for upward mobility in later

years, pointing to an alternative explanation to the myth of self-making for his extraordinary rise.

The first part of the chapter focuses on Irving's education, and compares his schooling with the education of gentlemen with whom he circulated in the late nineteenth century. The school Irving attended was typical of the urban private schools preferred by lower middle-class parents, but these came under severe criticism later in the century for their inadequacies. The account of Irving's limited education in his biography is clipped, and presents it in a favourable light. At school Irving met William Pinches, his headmaster, who became the first of three significant role models in his youth who inspired him and provided him with resources for constructing his identity.

The second part of the chapter constructs Irving's expanding social network in this new urban context. The Brodribbs had close family living nearby, but these lower middle-class kin receive no mention in Irving's biography. Nor do the lower middle-class friends he made at school or in his teenage work places. The chapel Irving attended with his parents exposed him to new people, including the second significant man in his youth, the preacher John Macfarlane. Irving admired Macfarlane, who encouraged him to engage with self-improving activities and took him to sites of cultural interest in London. Irving was steeped in ideas of self-improvement, attending elocution classes at a local adult education institution. His growing sense of self and identity was undoubtedly shaped by these particular experiences, and is demonstrated in his increasingly sophisticated letter writing.

Irving's education

Irving's education was characteristic of the lower middle class. Despite their straightened circumstances, the Brodribbs managed to pay for some formal education for Irving when he arrived in London. From the age of eleven to thirteen, from 1849 to 1851, Irving attended the City Commercial School, a private day school catering for lower middle-class boys at the bottom end of the fee-paying market. It was situated in a low-roofed building in George Yard, Lombard Street, in the heart of the City of London, close to where Irving

lived. Little is known about City Commercial School. Like many other private schools from this period there is no trace of any official school records that might have once existed. Evidence for these private schools in the nineteenth century is piecemeal and records are sporadic because many existed as long as the teacher was in business, which could be brief in what was a highly competitive market.[323] But it is possible to construct a flavour of the school and its headmaster William Pinches (born 1795) through auto/biographical accounts and references to the Pinches family in sources on education. These sources suggest that the school that Irving attended was typical of a type of private schooling popular with lower middle-class parents in London in the mid-Victorian period. Pinches had set up the school in 1830, and thirty years later in 1861 he was running it with his son Edward Ewen Pinches (1838-1912). It was listed in the 1861 *Crockford's Scholastic Directory* in the section 'Private schools for Gentlemen', although this was far from the reality, as evidence suggests that the students were not drawn from polite households.[324]

The duration of Irving's education was just two years, which was unusually short even for the lower middle class.[325] Other boys from his social background were likely to receive formal schooling until the age of at least fourteen. However, this varied as the duration of lower middle-class private schooling was entirely dependent on parents' attitudes towards education in relation to future employment, as well as their financial circumstances. Horace Mann (1823–1917), a civil servant and the author of the report on education in Britain from the 1851 census commented:

> In general a parent, in whatever station, takes himself and his own social status as the standard up to which he purposes to educate his offspring: the nobility, the gentry, merchants, tradesmen, artizans [sic], and agricultural labourers expect to see their children occupying just the same positions as themselves, and not unnaturally seek to qualify them for no higher duties. Hence it is that only those whose after-life is destined to be spent in intellectual exercises, as the pastime of

[323] Margaret Bryant, 'Topographical Resources: Private and Secondary Education in Middlesex from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century', in *Local Studies in the History of Education*, ed. T.G. Cook (London: Methuen & Co, 1972), 99–135.

[324] *Crockford's Scholastic Directory for 1861* (London, 1861).

[325] General Register Office, *Education in Great Britain. Being the Official Report of H. Mann.* (London: Routledge and Co, 1854), xliv.

> an affluent leisure or the subject matter of professional activity, prolong their educational career beyond the elementary school period.[326]

In other words parents equipped their sons with the same level of education as they themselves had received, and expected them to pursue similar occupations. Historian Jason Long has shown through a statistical evaluation of census data from 1851 to 1881 that the father's occupational class exerted a much greater influence on the son's adult occupational class than did duration of school attendance, which suggests that Mann's view was not far from the reality.[327] Similarly, Peter Searby's study of lower middle-class schooling confirms the likelihood that sons would receive the same level of education as their fathers and would follow them into occupations similar to their own.[328] Samuel Brodribb's educational experience is not known, but it was likely to have been a mix of Sunday schooling and private schooling, in keeping with educational provision in rural communities in the early nineteenth century. It is likely therefore that Samuel educated his son to a similar level to himself. And although it is not known why Irving left school at the age of thirteen – possibly family finances could not sustain further education – it is probable that it was because he had by that stage enough education to go into the workforce as a clerk, the same occupation as his father.

The type and duration of education that Irving received put him at a disadvantage amongst polite society. As I will demonstrate in chapters four and five, the biographies of most of the men that Irving eventually circulated with in later life indicate that they were educated for longer, at the middle to top end of the private market. Irving therefore eventually moved in a social milieu that his formal schooling had not equipped him for. A brief overview of this fee-paying school system demonstrates the differences in schooling between Irving and the majority of men he moved with in polite circles by the 1870s. Educational provision for children was wide-ranging by the mid-Victorian years, but

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[326] Ibid., 37.

[327] Jason Long, 'The Socio-Economic Return to Primary Schooling in Victorian England', *Journal of Economic History* 66, no. 04 (December 2006): 1026–1053.

[328] Peter Searby, 'The Schooling of Kipps: The Education of Lower Middle-Class Boys in England', in *Educating the Victorian Middle Class*, ed. Peter Searby (Leicester: History of Education Society, 1982), 113–31; David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

education was not widely available for free until 1891. For most of the nineteenth century, therefore, education was based on parents' ability to pay.

An education at one of the public schools (Harrow, Winchester, Eton, Shrewsbury, Merchant Taylors, St Paul's, Charterhouse and Rugby) was one option at the high end of the fee-paying market. Fees were well beyond the reach of most parents.[329] Free schooling in the classical languages according to the original foundation was available for a limited number of pupils, but securing this free place at a public school was often dependent on family connections.[330] Pupils typically entered public school between the ages of nine to thirteen, after having received a primary education either from a private tutor at home or at a private preparatory school.[331] But there was no standard starting age or duration of attendance at public school. The grammar schools provided an option in the mid- to high-end of the fee-paying market. Like public schools, grammar schools had been set up by charitable foundations in previous centuries and focused on teaching the classical languages. And like public schools, many grammar schools had introduced extra charges for subjects taught in addition to Latin, as well as introducing fee-paying pupils.[332] Some grammar schools, therefore, were often essentially fee-paying private schools providing an excellent standard of education, and were schools of choice for parents who wanted their sons to receive a classical education. In addition to the endowed schools, parents could also send their sons to a proprietary school established by a company or philanthropist. One of Irving's patrons, J.L. Toole (1830-1906), attended this type of school, the relevance of which I will explain further in chapter four.

Another option in the fee-paying market was private schooling. The unsatisfactory nature of many of the endowed schools before the improvements resulting from the Endowed Schools Act of 1869, and the growing number of parents seeking to educate

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[329] W.L. Guttsman, *The English Ruling Class* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), 201.

[330] See, for example, Trollope's own schooling in Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), Chapter 1.

[331] Donald Leinster-Mackay, *The Rise of the English Prep School* (London: Falmer, 1984).

[332] For a detailed discussion of the endowed grammar schools before the reforms of the late 1860s see Keith Evans, *The Development and Structure of the English School System* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985). See also P.J. Dixon, 'The Lower Middle Class Child in the Grammar School: A Lancashire Industrial Town 1850-1875', in *Educating the Victorian Middle Class*, ed. Peter Searby (Leicester: History of Education Society, 1982).

their sons beyond voluntary/state sector provision, led to an explosion in private schools in the nineteenth century. In London in particular the provision of private schooling expanded rapidly in the first half of the nineteenth century in order to meet the needs of the growing middle class. The population expanded in these decades from 865,845 in 1801 to 2,803,989 in 1861, which provided plenty of opportunity for private adventurers like Irving's schoolmaster to meet this demand.[333] Individuals ran private schools for profit, and standards and curricula could vary enormously. Some of the more exclusive of these schools provided an all-round education to pupils up to the age of eighteen, with a wide, modern curriculum that included science, maths, history, classics, European languages and geography. This level of education was necessary for entry into the universities. Other private schools offered a 'practical' education for the sons of the middle classes, with the benefits of close supervision and a diverse, 'modern' curriculum that did not focus on or did not include classical languages. The content of the school curriculum – what should be taught and what was useful knowledge – was hotly debated during the course of the nineteenth century.[334] The classical languages had been the focus of learning in the endowed public and grammar schools for centuries, and this 'liberal' education still retained significant social prestige. But the changing needs of a growing workforce required certain skills from school-leavers. In particular there was an increasing call for a solid foundation in reading, writing and arithmetic for office work, as well as practical knowledge of science and engineering. The names of schools signified their purpose, so that those called 'commercial', like Irving's, were aimed primarily at parents looking for an education fit for a career in business.[335]

At the higher end of the private market many Anglican clergyman offered day or board schooling in respectable surroundings in order to supplement their incomes. Pupils would learn classical languages alongside other subjects in a small school, and this was frequently the choice for the aristocracy, gentry and upper middle class for the duration or part of their sons' education. Charles J. Mathews (1803-1878), another of Irving's

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[333] Margaret Bryant, *The London Experience of Secondary Education* (London: Athlone, 1986).

[334] An influential Victorian text on this subject was Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1869).

[335] J.S. Cockburn, H.P.F. King, and K. G. T McDonnell, eds., 'Private Education from the Sixteenth Century: The Reign of Victoria', in *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 1, Physique, Archaeology, Domesday, Ecclesiastical Organization, the Jews, Religious Houses, Education of Working Classes To 1870, Private Education From Sixteenth Century* (London: Victoria County History, 1969), 255–85.

patrons, received this kind of education. The middle range of schools provided sons with an education to the age of fifteen or sixteen before entering a family business, an articled position, or a profession such as law or medicine. Provision at the bottom end of the market was targeted at the lower middle class and was little better than the provision at voluntary and state-subsidized elementary schools.[336] Despite the financial burden and the poor standards of education at the bottom end of the market, many lower middle-class parents did not want their children to attend voluntary and state-subsidized elementary schools for status reasons.

Irving's parents were limited in their choice of school not only by their low income but also by their social position. Parents were wary of their sons mixing with other children who they perceived to be below them in the social hierarchy, so schooling was largely segregated according to children's social background.[337] Throughout the nineteenth century elite opinion frequently voiced concerns over the harmful outcomes of social mixing with vulgar children at school. Samuel Butler (1774-1839), the headmaster of public school Shrewsbury, claimed that this was a significant factor for elite parents in their selection of school. In a letter to Lord Brougham in 1820, Butler criticised the Parliamentary Bill that proposed to amalgamate the grammar schools into a system of parish schools. One of Butler's many concerns with Brougham's proposal was that middle-class parents, who had previously made the most use of grammar schools, would be wary of sending their sons to an amalgamated school attended by children 'greatly their inferior':

> They will know and feel, without the least ill-will or disrespect to the lowest order of society, that their children can learn no improvements in manners and morals by associating with all the lowest boys of the parish, and they will feel it necessary and inevitable, to forgo one of these two advantages, either the preservation of their children's minds from the contagion of vulgar example, or the benefits of an institution which they cannot enjoy without exposing them to so great a risk.[338]

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[336] Searby, 'Schooling of Kipps'.

[337] W.E. Marsden, 'Schools for the Urban Lower Middle Class: Third Grade or Higher Grade?', in *Educating the Victorian Middle Class*, ed. Peter Searby (Leicester: History of Education Society, 1982).

[338] Samuel Butler, *A Letter to Henry Brougham, Esq., M.P., On Certain Clauses in the Education Bills Now Before Parliament.* (Shrewsbury: Weddowes, 1820), 18–21.

Butler was voicing the opinion that mixing with vulgar children would compromise an important aspect of education: refining behaviour. The behaviour of the vulgar was regarded as a 'contagion', an infectious disease that parents must protect against. Fifty years later, the same concerns over social mixing in schools were still being voiced. Joseph Hutton, headmaster of Hove House School, a private school in Brighton, suggested that schoolmasters had to be wary of accepting 'the tradesman's son' into a school of 'young gentlemen' because it might be detrimental to the school's reputation. Empathising with the teacher who, obliged by competition in the market, was forced to introduce pupils from the lower middle class into his school, Hutton remarked that he could always reconsider his entrance criteria:

> [The schoolmaster] may have some misgiving that perhaps he is introducing some vulgar element into his School; but for this he has laid his account long ago, when a tradesman's son first crossed his threshold; and he is well aware that, if he find his School suffer by the intermixture of the ideas and language attributed to the sons of men in retail business, he can change his rule to-morrow, and exclude the obnoxious class.[339]

Like Butler, Hutton's concern was about the detrimental effects of the 'ideas and language' of lower middle-class families. Differences in accent and ways of thinking were a source of concern, and elite parents had to be vigilant of this influence on their children.

Auto/biographical accounts by men who had attended City Commercial School in the late 1840s and early 1850s confirm this picture of social segregation in private education. Studying at the school at roughly the same time as Irving were other boys from lower middle-class families including Edward Plumbridge (1838-1917), whose father was a fruit and nut importer; Alexander Mackennal (1835-1904), who like Irving had moved to London in the late 1840s from rural Cornwall and whose father, like Samuel Brodribb at one time, was a commercial traveller in drapery; Lawrence Barnett Phillips (1842-1922), whose father was a jeweller; Edward Brabrook (1839-1930), whose father was the manager of the shop for S.W. Silver, a shipping agency and clothiers for travel

[339] Joseph Hutton, *A Few Words on Private Schools, Their Deficiencies, Advantages and Needs, in Special Relation to the Proposals of the Schools-Inquiry Commission* (Brighton, 1870), 28–29.

overseas and a member of the local Methodist Society; Walter Wilkin (1842-1922), whose father was a yeast dealer; and Edward Clarke (1841-1931), whose father was a silversmith and jeweller.[340]

Edward Clarke's autobiography reveals a very similar upbringing to Irving's. Clarke and Irving were not at City Commercial School at the same time, although they met in later life and became friends. Clarke's father was born in Somerset in 1800, just fifteen miles from Clutton where Samuel Brodribb was born in 1803. And like Irving's family, Clarke came from a long line of undistinguished yeoman farmers in the Somerset region. With a rudimentary education, Clarke's father moved to Bath, just as Samuel had moved to Bristol, to find employment in a trade. He was apprenticed to a silversmith for seven years before moving to London, just as Samuel had, to find work. Clarke's father was then employed in a shop, like Samuel, before he set up as a jeweller in King William Street. The family lived above their shop in a small space run on a very low income, and Clarke himself slept in the shop with the shop boy until the age of seventeen. Clarke's mother, just like Irving's mother Mary, was very religious. She provided the rudiments of Clarke's education at home, before he went to school at the age of ten. After two years at a private school in Edmonton where he had an elocution master, learnt shorthand and the elementary basics, Clarke joined City Commercial School in 1852. Like Irving his education was over before he was fourteen because money was low and he had learnt a sufficient amount to 'be of use in the shop'.[341] As a schoolboy Irving was therefore mixing with children who came from similar social and economic backgrounds.

Little is known about the headmaster William Pinches' background and education. His father Thomas Webster Pinches (1748-1802) was an 'oilman' operating from the Strand in London and died when Pinches was just seven years old.[342] His father's occupation as a commercial trader would place Pinches in the lower middle class, but

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[340] Edward Plumbridge TNA 1851 EWS Census HO107/1531/57/9; Alexander Mackennal TNA 1851 EWS Census HO107/1538/365/14; for Lawrence Barnett Phillips see W.D. Rubinstein, M. Jolles, and H.L. Rubinstein, eds., *The Palgrave Dictionary of Anglo-Jewish History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 752; Edward Brabrook, *Sir Edward Brabrook: Some Notes on His Life, Written by Himself, About 1918, For the Information of His Descendants* (London, 1932);Walter Wilkin TNA 1861 EWS Census RG09/229/8/14; Edward Clarke, *The Story of My Life* (London: John Murray, 1918).

[341] Clarke, *Story of My Life*, 24.

[342] *The Morning Post and Gazetteer* , Monday, October 25, 1802; Issue 10626: 1.

accounts from alumni of City Commercial School present him as an educated man. He was certainly very far from the representation of the inept and cruel schoolmaster in popular Dickens novels, such as Wackford Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838) or Dr Blimber in *Dombey and Sons* (1848). Indeed Pinches was the head of a prominent family of respected teachers in the private market. His eldest son Dr Conrad Hume Pinches (1820-1881) became the headmaster of a successful private school in Kennington, Clarendon House. His second and third sons, William Byron Pinches (1826-1897) and Edward Ewen Pinches (1838-1912), also became schoolmasters, as did two of his daughters.

Although a question mark surrounds Pinches' background, his sons were certainly gentlemen, and had substantial reputations in the field of education by the time Irving's 1883 biography was published. It is likely that Brereton mentioned Irving's schoolmaster by name because the respectability of the Pinches family was by then beyond question. Pinches and his sons had been concerned with the question of the reputation of private education throughout their careers, and worked towards raising the status of their profession. They became members of the Royal College of Preceptors (RCP), an organisation founded in 1846 for the purpose of ensuring standards in the teaching profession and endowed with the authority to certify qualifications.[343] At this time there were no professional qualifications for teachers other than those for State elementary teachers and it was through bodies like the RCP that the teaching profession joined the growing trend towards recognition of professional status in the Victorian period.[344] Conrad Pinches joined the governing body of the RCP, becoming Treasurer in 1875, and was succeeded by his brother Edward in 1881. After Edward retired early from teaching in the 1860s he became a barrister but continued to be involved in private school inspecting and examining. Similarly, when Conrad retired early from school teaching after making a substantial fortune and also started to practice at the Bar in the 1870s he

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[343] College of Preceptors, *A List of the Council, Board of Examiners, Fellows, Licentiates, and Other Members of the College of Preceptors* (London, 1862). *Schools Inquiry Commission* Vol. IV. Minutes of evidence taken before the commissioners, part I. 1867-8 [C.3966]; *Royal Commission on secondary Education* Vol. II. Minutes of evidence taken before the royal commission on secondary education. 1895 [C.7862-1], 513-4.

[344] J. Vincent Chapman, *Professional Roots: The College of Preceptors in British Society* (Epping: Theydon Bois, 1985); W. J. Reader, *Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966).

maintained a close link with the teaching profession through his role with the RCP.[345] Furthermore, both Conrad and Edward were sufficiently serious figures in the private school sector to give testimony in Parliamentary inquiries into secondary education – Conrad to the Schools Inquiry Commission (Taunton Commission) in 1867 and Edward to the Royal Commission on Secondary Education (Bryce Commission) in 1895. William's sons were therefore known in polite circles in the late nineteenth century, so association with the Pinches name was a credit to Irving.

Pinches was an important and influential early figure to Irving. He remained in contact with his old schoolmaster and became friends with his son Edward Pinches, who was on the committee organising the valedictory banquet for Irving's tour of America in 1883. Edward Clarke described Pinches as 'one who found his chief enjoyment in poetry and the dramatic art', and in this it is clear that he profoundly inspired Irving.[346] In his autobiography Clarke offered a particularly vivid picture of the character and appearance of William Pinches:

> A short, stout, broad-shouldered man, active in movement, precise in dress; the invariable black tailed coat always well-brushed, the wide open waistcoat displaying a snowy shirt, at the throat of the small black tie under a turned-down collar which denoted one whose model in youth had been Lord Byron… A voice clear and strong and trained to excellent elocution…. a deep and earnest piety which found expression in his loving sympathy with every boy who came under his rule and tried to do his work honestly – this as well as I can draw it, is the picture of the man under whom I was so fortunate as to spend two happy years.[347]

Clearly Pinches provided a model of masculinity that exerted influence on his pupils. He appeared to be a kind man who inspired loyalty and admiration. By staying in contact with Pinches after he left school Irving was, consciously or otherwise, making decisions as to which of his associates were significant in these early years. In the extract above there is a focus on Pinches' appearance and behaviour. He had a 'voice clear and strong and

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[345] Details of Conrad Pinches' will published in *Illustrated London News*, Saturday July 30, 1881; Issue 22002:114.

[346] Clarke, *Story of My Life*, 23.

[347] Ibid., 22–23.

trained to excellent elocution'. Coming from a provincial background, this would have been Irving's first sustained exposure to a man who spoke with a polite voice. Furthermore, Pinches was 'precise' in his dress, and his style was Byronesque. The infamous nineteenth-century Romantic poet George Gordon Byron (1788-1824) was known for his eccentricities, and by implication Clarke meant that Pinches himself was eccentric.[348] Certainly Pinches' self-presentation would have been striking in comparison to the men that Irving had encountered in the provincial working-class Methodist community where he grew up. Chapter five examines how Irving began to style himself as eccentric when he became an actor, and it was perhaps the memory of Pinches that partly inspired him to do this. Irving's schoolmaster was almost certainly therefore one of the key figures in his adolescent social milieu who provided him with resources with which he could construct his appearance and identity.

Accounts from former pupils testify that William Pinches offered a solid education in the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. The fees at City Commercial School were just six pounds a year, which was at the lowest end of the private market. Clarke described the curriculum at the school as follows:

> There was no teaching of Greek; some of the elder boys learned Latin, for the sake of the grammar and not of the language; German was an extra rarely indulged in; and French was only permitted as a privilege of the higher classes. But the essentials of a good English education were soundly taught. To write clearly, to cypher [arithmetic] quickly, to read aloud with intelligent emphasis and to be accurate in grammar and spelling – these the schoolmaster rightly thought were the essentials.[349]

The focus was on the three R's with the option of other subjects, which cost parents more. It is not known whether Irving's parents paid for him to study any of these extra subjects. One 'extra' that we do know his parents invested in was elocution training.[350] In his autobiography, Clarke makes special mention of this aspect of the curriculum:

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[348] For example see 'Byron as an Eccentric' in John Timbs, *The Romance of London: Strange Stories, Scenes and Remarkable Persons of the Great Town* (London, 1865).

[349] Clarke, *Story of My Life*, 22.

[350] The focus on elocution seems to have been a feature of the Pinches family teaching: Conrad Hume Pinches, *The Practical Elocutionist For School Use, etc.* (London, 1854).

> There was one side of the school life, which I must mention separately… Elocution was taught to all whose parents had intelligence enough to permit the study. And once a year an entertainment was given at the Jews and General Literary and Scientific Institution at Sussex Hall, Leadenhall Street.[351]

Elocution training appealed to lower middle-class parents conscious of the significance of 'proper' accent and the correct way of speaking to 'get on' in society and in the job market. It is entirely possible that this was the motivation for Irving's parents – and the parents of his classmates – in selecting this particular school. Brereton's 1908 biography confirms that Irving took part in elocution training and performed at Sussex Hall in December 1850. Clarke recalled the encouragement that he and other boys received from Pinches on these performance nights:

> These were great nights. The hall was filled with parents and friends. The boys were in their evening dress of black jacket and black tie, the master sat at the side of the platform with lips moving as he followed every word of every recitation, and his kind eyes sparkling with fun or fire according as the piece was gay or grave.[352]

This kind of encouragement from Pinches must have had an impact on Irving. Pinches inspired Irving with this early training in reciting dramatic texts and public performance, and it was an aspect of school life at which Irving thrived. Clarke recalled that Pinches repeatedly mentioned Irving's talents after he had left the school:

> I had no rival in the present school, but even I could not hold my own against the memory of one who had just left. Whenever I had done anything particularly well I used to hear 'Very good, Clarke, very good, but I wish you could have heard Brodribb say that'.[353]

Pinches was clearly an exceptional teacher to Irving as he provided him with the opportunity to develop his skills and gain experiences in a safe and encouraging environment. Opportunities like this were not provided to every schoolboy, so once again

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[351] Clarke, *Story of My Life*, 23.

[352] Ibid., 23–24.

[353] Ibid., 24.

the particular circumstances of Irving's life enabled him to develop certain skills and to imagine himself in ways that others were not able to.

The type of education a man received became increasingly important as the century progressed because it became a quick indicator of social class. It is for this reason that Brereton, who was trying to present Irving's background in a positive light in the 1883 biography, manipulated the account of his minimal schooling to make it seem more substantial than it in fact was. Education had been high on the political agenda since the Second Reform Act of 1867, which controversially extended the vote to a million more men, effectively incorporating the lower middle class into the franchise.[354] Politicians and political commentators argued over the constituency for franchise extension before and long after the act was passed. For the writer Walter Bagehot (1826-1877), for example, a particular type of education, what he called 'a long culture', was one of the critical elements that separated those who should vote from those who should not:

> A life of labour, an incomplete education, a monotonous occupation, a career in which the hands are used much and the judgement is used little, cannot create as much flexible thought, as much applicable intelligence, as a life of leisure, a long culture, a varied experience, an existence by which the judgement is incessantly improved.[355]

For him, the aristocracy and 'the most educated or refined classes' were those most appropriate for political decision-making. Discussing the extension of the male franchise, Bagehot argued that the best political system was the current one in which the majority delegated its power to this educated minority. In Bagehot's view only 'highly cultivated people' were suited to make decisions on behalf of everyone since the 'lowest classes are not intelligent'.[356] In his use of this kind of terminology Bagehot was speaking in the language of polite culture. Bagehot certainly regarded himself as polite: he came from a long-established banking family, was wealthy and educated to degree level, and had

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[354] Robert Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848-1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

[355] Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: Fontana, 1993), 250–51.

[356] Ibid., 250.

moved in polite social circles throughout his life.[357] Had Irving remained an ordinary clerk, Bagehot would have regarded him as vulgar and not worthy of the vote.

Education was very significant in the perception of the distinction between polite and vulgar. Like Bagehot, the politician Robert Lowe (1811-1892) believed that the fault-line between the two groups in society, what he called the 'higher' and 'lower' classes, was education. In a speech on 'middle class education' to the Annual Dinner of the Liverpool Philomathic Society in 1868, Lowe discussed 'the education of a class that would not think of sending its children to primary schools supported by the State, and yet is not in the condition of life to think of sending its children to universities, or public schools'.[358] Although Lowe called it 'middle-class education', the constituency he described was the lower middle class. This education might be practical in terms of preparing a child for the workplace but by its very restricted nature it did not broaden the mind, a quality that he regarded as essential for exercising the franchise:

> the sort of education peculiar to this class, is… a technical education… children are sent to what are called commercial academies, to read, write, and cypher, to read business letters, understand bills of parcels, and keep books by single and double entry – in fact to do at school precisely those things they will be called upon to do in after life… They have no culture, no mental discipline; they don't approach business from the vantage ground of more extensive knowledge than its detail, and the consequence is they don't rise above their position.[359]

Lowe's remedy for this kind of narrow education was not to introduce the classics or other subjects into their curriculum, but to encourage a more thorough study of what he regarded as exemplary English texts, such as Shakespeare and Byron. In this way, Lowe argued, the vulgar would be reading more than just the inferior English found in cheap newspapers, and would be better placed to do well in life: 'Is it not time that we who speak that language, read that language, so much of whose success in life depends on how we can mould that language; we who make bargains in that language, who make

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[357] Joseph Hamburger, 'Bagehot, Walter (1826-1877)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn, May 2009 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1029, accessed 14 June 2017].

[358] Robert Lowe, *Middle Class and Primary Education: Two Speeches, etc.* (London, 1868), 3.

[359] Ibid., 5.

love in it – should know something about it?'[360] Here Lowe echoed what many advice literature writers said about the importance of speaking and writing for success in society and business, without which men had limited prospects.

This criticism of basic commercial schooling, the kind that Irving had experienced, became increasingly prevalent in public debates on education throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The Rev. Dr C. Badham, headmaster of a proprietary school in Birmingham, expressed the view of many elite commentators on the value of commercial education:

> No parent… would be satisfied with the wretched mechanical acquirements which are now the common results of five or six years at a commercial academy, if he knew that by going elsewhere he could combine the vulgar utilities which he hopes from thence, with the utilities of a higher kind.[361]

Badham's use of the word vulgar indicated a feeling that these commercial skills were for vulgar minds rather than the refined minds that Bagehot and other elite commentators believed were the result of a more rounded education, combining liberal and commercial training. This contributed to the sense that there were increasingly two groups of people with education: the higher ranks of society, and the lower ranks. By the time the 1883 biography was published, a longer, more rounded education combining commercial and liberal aspects had come to be aligned with polite status. Brereton positioned Irving's schooling in just such a way in an attempt to shelter him from the criticism of those who associated a basic commercial education with the vulgar majority. The brief mention of his schooling therefore did not even mention the word 'commercial':

> In the year 1849, the boy was placed by his father at the private school of Dr Pinches, in George Yard, Lombard Street. Here he exhibited some of his dramatic power, and at one of the school entertainments, when the boys recited English classics and Latin verse, he wished to recite the poem of 'The Uncle', the weirdness of which struck his fancy. Dr Pinches, however, good-humouredly

[360] Robert Lowe, *Primary and Classical Education: An Address Delivered Before the Philosophical Institution of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1867), 10.

[361] Charles Badham, *Thoughts on Classical and Commercial Education* (Birmingham: Cornish Bros, 1864), 23.

> read the poem, and after advising him to choose something a little less theatrical, selected Curran's 'Defence of Hamilton Rowan'.[362]

Despite Irving's basic commercial education Brereton focused his discussion of Irving's education on the study of 'English classics and Latin verse'. By doing so Brereton suggested to readers that the 'liberal' aspect of Irving's education was more significant than it was in reality; indeed Irving admitted later in life that he had no knowledge of classical languages. Furthermore, he referred to Pinches as 'Dr Pinches', suggesting he was a university-educated man. Pinches himself was not educated to degree level, and it is not known whether he had sufficient knowledge of classical languages to teach Latin, as there were two other teachers in the school who might have taught this.[363] What this extract suggests is that Irving was aware by the 1880s of the importance of appearing to know these things, even if he did not. By carefully selecting and omitting facts and maintaining strategic silences about Irving's education Brereton, who was being paid by Irving to write his biography, presented it as more substantial and more fitting of a gentleman than Irving's schooling actually had been.

The above extract from Irving's 1883 biography also worked in his favour in another way, referring to his interest in the 'theatrical' from an early age. Just as Brereton presented Irving as having a natural-born artistic imagination fed by the wild landscape of Cornwall, so too here he reinforced this idea by presenting Irving as a dramatic genius destined for greatness through his interest in eccentric poems such as 'The Uncle' by the Scottish lawyer and poet Henry Glassford Bell (1803-1874). 'The Uncle' was the first poem in Glassford Bell's collection *Summer and Winter Hours* (1831), which became a favourite text for teachers of elocution in the Victorian period.[364] Fans of Irving would have understood the reference to this poem because he frequently performed recitations of it in later years. In his repeated return to this poem Irving demonstrated the profound influence of his schoolmaster.

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[362] Austin Brereton, *Henry Irving: A Biographical Sketch* (London: David Bogue, 1883), 6.

[363] *Crockford's Scholastic Directory* for 1861 (London, 1861) includes the letters B.A. after Edward Ewen's name but not after William's. Brabrook refers to two assistant masters, Mr Johnson and Mr Dickens, Brabrook, *Sir Edward Brabrook*, 9.

[364] Michael S. Moss, 'Bell, Henry Glassford (1803-1874)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn, May 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2004, accessed 23 Nov 2015].

Ironically, the reality of elite education was often far from the picture that Bagehot and others described to support their political arguments. Many Victorians raised questions about elite standards of education. A recurrent idea circulating in literature and journalism in the mid-Victorian years was the lack of education that many men from polite backgrounds felt they had gained from their schooling. In practice some gentlemen were no more educated than the lower middle class. Lowe acknowledged that even 'a highly educated man – one who may have received the best education at the highest public schools, or at Oxford – may be in total ignorance of' basic knowledge. Lowe elaborated on these educational deficiencies:

> He very often does not know anything about arithmetic, and that ignorance sticks to him through life; he knows nothing of accounts, he does not know the meaning of double entry, or even a common debtor and creditor account. He may write an execrable hand; good clear writing – perhaps the most important qualification of a gentleman or man of business can possess – is totally neglected. He may be perfectly deficient in spelling.[365]

Lowe attributed these deficiencies to the focus in elite education on the study of classics, to the exclusion of all other subjects. Public schools had had a poor reputation for behaviour and standards of teaching until they started to undergo improvements following the reforms of Thomas Arnold (1795-1842), headmaster at Rugby in the 1830s.[366] Further reforms came in the late nineteenth century following the Clarendon Commission (1861-4), which inquired into the governance and curriculum of the public schools due to concerns over poor standards and mismanagement. The results of these improvements were more widely evident in the late nineteenth century, but in the mid-Victorian years elite education certainly did not guarantee any more mastery of basic knowledge than the education of the lower classes.

Anthony Trollope testified to this fact in his autobiography, declaring that he was taught nothing at either Harrow or Winchester where he received his so-called education: 'During the whole of those twelve years no attempt had been made to teach

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[365] Lowe, *Primary*, 25.

[366] Ian Bradley and Brian Simon, *The Victorian Public School: Studies in the Development of an Educational Institution* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975); Michael McCrum, *Thomas Arnold, Head Master: A Reassessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

me anything but Latin and Greek, and very little attempt to teach me those languages'.[367] Trollope asserted that the knowledge that he learnt was acquired after he left school. In his novel *The Three Clerks* (1858) Trollope recounted through the character Charley Tudor the way in which he was admitted to the position of clerk in the General Post Office. After taking an examination in which he demonstrated his inability to accurately copy some lines from *The Times* newspaper and his lack of proficiency in arithmetic, he got the job. The 'long culture' that Bagehot celebrated was for some little more than a piecemeal knowledge of the classical languages and a limited grasp of the three R's. What this suggested was that polite status was not so much about the level and duration of a man's education than their sense of themselves as part of this privileged group from an early age.

Along with his social origins, Irving's education was his 'Achilles heel' in polite society. He did not have the education of a gentleman, and this aspect was an easy target for his critics. Irving worked hard to deflect these criticisms. In what could be read as a deliberate attempt to hide his lack of education, Irving positioned himself as a serious and 'intellectual' actor from the moment he became successful in the early 1870s. Irving's preferred repertoire was Shakespeare, thereby aligning himself with an English playwright who was, for most of the nineteenth century, beyond criticism.[368] He secured his position as one of the great actors of Hamlet in 1874, and over the following two decades the Lyceum became the leading theatre in London for Shakespearean productions. Irving also attempted to present himself as erudite by writing about Shakespeare: several articles appeared in the late 1870s in *The Nineteenth Century*, a monthly literary periodical which had been established in order to publish debates by leading intellectuals.[369] But as Irving's fame grew, some critics started to voice concerns about his treatment of Shakespeare. Several press correspondents severely criticised Irving's performance in *Macbeth* in 1875. The announcement that Irving would stage

[367] Trollope, *An Autobiography*, 17.

[368] Adrian Poole, *Shakespeare and the Victorians* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2003).

[369] Henry Irving, 'Shakspearian Notes', *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review* 1, no. 2 (April 1877): 327–30; Henry Irving, 'An Actor's Notes on Shakspeare', *The Nineteenth Century* 1, no. 3 (May 1877): 524–30; Henry Irving, 'An Actor's Notes on Shakespeare', *The Nineteenth Century* 5, no. 24 (February 1879): 260–63.

Othello following *Macbeth* led to an anonymous open letter in the satirical magazine *Fun* in December 1875, which provoked Irving to take libel action against its editor:

> To a Fashionable Tragedian.
> Sir, I read with regret that it is your intention – as soon as present failure at your House can be with dignity withdrawn – to startle Shakespearian scholars and the public with your conception of the character of Othello. In the name of humanity to which, in spite of your transcendent abilities, you cannot avoid belonging, I beseech you, for the sake of order and morality, to abandon the idea. For some years past you have been the prime mover in a series of dramas which, carried by you to the utmost point of realistic ghastliness, have undermined the constitution of society and familiarised the masses with the most loathsome details of crime and bloodshed. With the hireling portion of the Press at your command, you have induced the vulgar and unthinking to consider you a model of histrionic ability and the pioneer of an intellectual and cultured school of dramatic art.[370]

The letter, written by one of the journalists at *Fun*, George R. Sims (1847-1922), mocked Irving's intellectual credentials. The reference to 'details of crime and bloodshed' aligned Irving's productions with Victorian popular melodrama aimed at the working classes and which was characterised by simplistic tales of crime and morality, spectacle and an exaggerated acting style.[371] Sims derided Irving's productions and suggested they were pitched at the level of the 'vulgar' or in other words those with limited education. In this way he was also insinuating that Irving himself was vulgar. Although this in itself was damaging to Irving's reputation, the accusation that Irving was bribing theatre critics was the libellous statement. The paper was forced to retract the letter and offer an apology.

In 1877 Irving suffered perhaps the most severe critical onslaught on his education with the publication of an anonymous pamphlet entitled *The Fashionable Tragedian*, authored by William Archer (1856-1924), a budding young theatre critic fresh out of Edinburgh University. 'The fashionable tragedian' had become Irving's sobriquet, and Archer's critique targeted and ridiculed all the aspects of Irving's acting for which he had been lauded, including his intellectuality:

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[370] 'To a Fashionable Tragedian' *Fun*, 24 December 1875, quoted in Laurence Irving, *Henry Irving: The Actor and His World* (London: Faber, 1951), 270–71.

[371] See for example, *Maria Marten; or, the Murder in the Red Barn. A Drama in Two Acts* (London, 1877). On the fascination with literary and cultural representations of murder see Bridget Walsh, *Domestic Murder in Nineteenth-Century England: Literary and Cultural Representations* (Routledge, 2016).

> His much-lauded INTELLECTUALITY is not worth quarrelling about. It is of course very satisfactory, in the present low state of culture among actors, to possess a tragedian who can write in advanced reviews, read essays on the drama, make neat self-laudatory speeches at dramatic dinners, occupy the president's chair of a literary institute, and who is, in short, qualified to shine at temperance soirees and "aesthetic teas". We have come across several of Mr Irving's lucubrations, and have as yet failed to discover any transcendent genius in them. They seemed, to put it mildly, a little commonplace; but we can safely grant him all "eminence" in intellectual respects.[372]

In this passage Archer mocked Irving for his attempt to position himself as intellectual by suggesting he was the best of the low-grade acting profession. And he dismissed Irving's writings on Shakespeare as 'a little commonplace'. Once again Irving's acting is referred to as 'vulgar'. Archer compared Irving with Dickens's famous character Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield*, claiming that he made 'of Macbeth a Uriah Heep in chain armour', and 'even when he hits upon a good and original idea, he has not the taste to abstain from running it to the death'.[373] Archer condemned the excisions Irving made in Shakespeare's scripts, a criticism others made of him also. In figure 3 (page 306), for example, Irving's face and thin body is represented as a corkscrew pulling out the cork from a small pot labelled 'Essence of Shakspeare [sic] Bottled by Digby Grant'. Readers would have understood this as a representation of Irving because of the actor's distinctive black hair and long thin legs, and because he famously played Digby Grant, a fraudulent character masquerading as a gentleman. The suggestion in this cartoon was that Irving was crassly editing down Shakespeare to sell to the masses for financial gain, and that he had pretensions to the status of an educated gentleman. Attempting to be 'intellectual' or to speak without knowledge on a topic was one of the dangers behavioural advice writers warned against, as it demonstrated vulgarity in polite circles. Other detractors also lampooned Irving's arrangements of Shakespeare. The playwright and theatre critic George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) said of Irving:

> He does not merely cut plays; he disembowels them. In Cymbeline he has quite surpassed himself by extirpating the antiphonal third verse of the famous dirge. A

[372] William Archer, *The Fashionable Tragedian: A Criticism* (Edinburgh: T Gray & Co, 1877), 11–12.

[373] Ibid., 22.

> man who would do that would do anything – cut the coda out of the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, or shorten one of Velázquez's Philips into a kitcat to make it fit over his drawing room mantelpiece.[374]

Here Shaw suggested that Irving was so lacking in knowledge of the products of high culture that he had no understanding of the value of great art, including in his own field of drama. Shaw's sustained cultural denigration of Irving over the years was perhaps a foil for his own social background and education. In fact, there were many similarities between Irving and Shaw. Shaw's drunkard Irish father had been a law clerk, and Shaw's education was limited, piecemeal and low-grade. Like Irving, Shaw had started his working life as a clerk, and reinvented himself when he made the move from Dublin to London at the age of twenty.[375] His 1913 play *Pygmalion*, in which a gentleman teaches a vulgar young woman how to perform the bodily practices and behaviour of a polite lady suggests a fascination with the veneer of gentility, a process perhaps Shaw himself was personally familiar with.

Yet more attacks came from journalists poking fun at Irving's attempts to position himself as an erudite man. Referring to something Irving had said publicly, the gossip columnist of the Sunday sporting newspaper *The Referee* mocked Irving for his incorrect grammar in 1878:

> Henry appears to have got a little mixed in his machinery and, if he is correctly reported, his grammar appears to be a little shady. 'Until such time, at least, when,' 'a wholesome influence have –' Oh, Henry, you mustn't talk about education in that way.[376]

Irving's education continued to be an element for which he was mocked late into his career. In 1892 Dublin University conferred an honorary degree on Irving, which provoked a cartoon (publication unidentified) in which he was depicted as a don, wearing academic robes and a mortarboard (see figure 4, page 307). In this cartoon Irving appears

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[374] George Bernard Shaw, 'Cymbeline', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 82, no. 2135 (26 September 1896): 339–41.

[375] Stanley Weintraub, 'Shaw, George Bernard (1856–1950)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn, Sept 2013 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36047, accessed 8 May 2016].

[376] *The Referee*, 3 Nov, 1878.

with his friend the actor J.L. Toole, also dressed in academic garb. Toole had played in *The Don* at Toole's Theatre in 1888, a comedy written especially for the actor by Herman C. Merivale (1839-1906). On the wall is a sign referring to the play *The Corsican Brothers* in which Irving had acted many times and whose plot focuses on two Italian brothers who were conjoined at birth – Irving and Toole were well known to be very close. The caption states 'J.L.T. (to Dr Irving) "I say, Henry, -- 'scuse my glove – I've been a don myself, don'tcherknow. I can give you a tip or two about playing the part!' Here the cartoonist mocked the 'incorrect' pronunciation of polite phrases that the lower classes were often unable to master. But the suggestion also was that Irving was making himself ridiculous by accepting honorary degrees: just as Toole had acted the part of an academic, so too was Irving acting the part of an intellectual.

Theatre historian Jeffrey Richards has argued that this satire and criticism came largely from those who were starting to pursue a different agenda in the theatre from Irving.[377] And whilst it is certainly true that both Archer and Shaw became staunch supporters of the new realist theatre of playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen which began to appear on the London stage in the late nineteenth century, I suggest that these critiques can also be read as illustrations of class prejudice, particular aimed at perceived class interlopers. These satires of Irving claimed to 'unmask' him as an intellectual fraud, and worked to unbalance (although never entirely displaced) Irving's own construction of himself as an intellectual. The irony of Shaw's class prejudice demonstrates the sensitivity around social differences in late Victorian society, and the prevalence of fears over fraudulent gentility.

Irving was criticized for the very subject on which he claimed authority and in which he had the most experience – the theatre. But he was also the target of gossip in polite circles for his lack of knowledge in other subjects. Commenting on Irving's powers of conversation, the author H.M. Walbrook (1865-1941) recounted a story he had heard from the classicist Andrew Lang (1844-1912):

[377] Jeffrey Richards, *Sir Henry Irving: A Victorian Actor and His World* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005), chapter 6.

> On other topics than those of the theatre his 'small talk' could be very small indeed. Andrew Lang once met him at a little dinner party and remarked afterwards: 'If, as I am told, Irving is distinctly intellectual he concealed the circumstance, perhaps in pity of our frivolity'. As two such famous talkers as James Russell Lowell and George du Maurier were among the five or six guests, it is quite likely that Irving found himself rather overpowered.[378]

This extract demonstrates one aspect of polite culture Irving was never able to master: the art of conversation. Chapter one detailed the topics which advice writers pointed to as appropriate for polite conversation and I suggested they required a level of education that was beyond that of the majority of the population. Nature, history, biography, science, art, music and literature were staple subjects: these were regarded as 'general knowledge', and were requisite: 'anyone attempting to converse in good society without possessing, at least, the elements of general knowledge, must soon stumble and go wrong'.[379] To converse really well required more than just superficial details of these subjects, but above all it was important to have even 'the merest smattering' in order to avoid looking foolish.[380] Despite Irving's attempts to construct himself as an educated and cultured gentleman he had not received the kind of formal or cultural education that equipped him for this required level of knowledge. His inability in this area was evident to Irving's contemporaries and clearly made him the butt of jokes.

Irving had received just two years of formal education in a commercial school at the bottom end of the market, which educated him sufficiently to embark on his working life as a clerk. He was just thirteen years old when he entered the workforce as a clerk in the legal office of W. Paterson Esq. According to Brereton Irving had secured this job through his parents' contacts: it was the 'office of a friend'.[381] Nepotism was a standard route for finding employment in the nineteenth century, and appointment to a prestigious post as a young man indicated the strength of the family's network.[382] It

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[378] H.M. Walbrook, 'Henry Irving', *Fortnightly*, February 1938, 210.

[379] *Talking and Debating: Or, Fluency of Speech Attained Without the Sacrifice of Elegance and Sense* (London, 1856), 7.

[380] Ibid., 7.

[381] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 6.

[382] *The Clerk: A Sketch in Outline of His Duties and Discipline* (London, 1878); Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship, and Patronage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

appears, however, that Irving secured this position not because his parents were well connected, but because they were the caretakers of Paterson's office when it was based at 68 Old Broad Street, where the Brodribb family lived.[383] His role as an office boy at this legal office was far from prestigious. Legal clerical work was, according to one Victorian commentator, 'about the poorest grazing ground a clerk can feed on. Lawyers and law stationers do not need men of talent, nor do such go to them'.[384] Because the legal system operated around three terms a year with holidays in between there were weeks of unemployment, which meant that pay for legal clerks and scribes was usually the lowest of all the clerking jobs.[385] By November 1852 Irving had moved to another job as a clerk in a publishing house, Thacker & Co, which he described as a 'large Public Office'.[386]

In the 1883 biography Irving once again worked to minimise this less prestigious part of his life story. Just two sentences were devoted to this part of his career, and no mention was made of his legal work:

> He was placed in the office of a friend, where he remained for a year, learning the duties of a clerk. He then entered the office of Mssrs W. Thacker & Co, East India Merchants, in Newgate Street, where he had the prospect of going after a time to India, and of eventually attaining a fair position in the world of commerce.[387]

This is unlikely to have been the reality of Irving's position as a clerk at Thacker & Co. Promotion up the ranks as an ordinary clerk was certainly possible for talented men in the mid-Victorian years, but those with articles were more likely to progress – and it is doubtful that Irving's parents were able to afford this. Nevertheless, the implication in this passage was that Irving was no ordinary clerk. Furthermore, there is a hint of romance in the idea that Irving might have gone to the exotic and far-off location of India. A career oversees in the British Empire was certainly a pull for an increasing

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[383] *The Morning Chronicle* Friday, March 17, 1843; Issue 5822: 1 refers to W. Paterson Esq, Solicitor, 68 Old Broad Street. Paterson and Longman were operating from 68 Old Broad Street until at least April 1857: *The Morning Chronicle* Saturday, April 11, 1857; Issue 28175.

[384] Benjamin Orchard, *The Clerks of Liverpool* (Liverpool: J Collinson, 1871), 35.

[385] David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958).

[386] Henry Irving, 'To Mary Ann Wilkins', Letter, (November 1852), Box 7, Folder 29, HLC, http://ccdl.libraries.claremont.edu/col/phl.

[387] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 6.

number of young gentlemen in the late nineteenth century when Irving's biography was published, and the fantasy of adventure for 'India-going boys' had been romanticised in literary culture since at least the 1850s. For example, in the 1853 article 'Gone Astray' in the journal *Household Words* Dickens described the excitement of the prospect of India to his boyish imagination as he wandered the streets of London as a child:

> I came to the India House. I had no doubt of its being the most wonderful, the most magnanimous, the most in all respects astonishing, establishment on the face of the Earth. Thinking much about the boys who went to India, I got among the outfitting shops. I read the list of things that were necessary for an India-going boy, and when I came to 'one brace of pistols', thought what happiness must be reserved for such a fate![388]

Irving presented his education and early working life in this clipped and positive light in order to deflect criticism of his lower middle-class origins as much as possible.

Irving's network in his teenage years

During Irving's adolescence in London he was circulating with people from a similar social background, but the 1883 biography remains silent about this social milieu. This is perhaps a sign that Irving wished to distance himself from the people he had circulated with in his youth, and is suggestive of the difficulty of maintaining such connections when it might compromise newly found social status. What is also striking about the milieu of Irving's youth is that it provided him with views of other social possibilities and ways of behaving, the prospect of geographical movement and personal reinvention.

In London Irving lived near to other Brodribb kin who must have featured significantly in his youth. Uriah Brodribb (1806-1867) was a distant relation by blood, but was a close associate of Irving's father Samuel, and was three years his senior. Samuel and Uriah grew up together in Clutton and must surely have been childhood friends; they appear to have remained close throughout their lives. Uriah had moved to Bristol by

[388] Charles Dickens, 'Gone Astray', *Household Words* VII, no. 177 (13 August 1853).

1830 and set up as a tea, coffee and spice vendor in Union Street.[389] It is possible Samuel worked for Uriah at some stage during the 1830s and it seems likely that Samuel introduced Uriah to his future wife Annie Harrill, who lived around the corner from him in Redcliffe Street, Bristol. It is also likely that Irving's parents moved to London in late 1843 after Samuel was released from debtors' prison, following in the footsteps of Uriah who had moved there.[390] By 1851 Uriah, his wife, son and three daughters were living at 24 Walbrook, just a ten-minute walk from Irving's house in Old Broad Street, and were also gaining extra income from lodgers. Uriah was employed as a clerk in a mustard manufactory, and it is possible that he helped Samuel to find a job as a clerk when he arrived back in London.[391] Irving's close family in London, therefore, were also lower middle class, living in very similar circumstances, with little prospects of social advancement. The silence around the Brodribb kin in the 1883 biography perhaps signalled Irving's anxiety about being labelled 'vulgar' because of his family connections.

Not all of Irving's extended family in London were lower middle class, but he does not appear to have had any interaction with them. As with many families in the nineteenth century, some members of Irving's kin had risen above others socially. John Brodribb Bergne (1800-1873), for example, became a successful civil servant and numismatics scholar, and resided with his family at a smart address in Knightsbridge.[392] His son John Henry Gibbs Bergne (1842-1908) was an exact contemporary of Irving, but had a very different, privileged upbringing. Educated at private school and afterwards at King's College, London, Bergne followed his father into the Foreign Office, and was knighted for his services in 1888.[393] Also living in London in the 1850s was another distant family member, William Perrin Brodribb (1800-1869). William had moved to London in the 1820s and became an eminent surgeon. He lived with his wife and children in Bloomsbury Square, with their housemaid, cook and two nurses. By this time this area of

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[389] *The Bristol Mercury* , Tuesday, December 28, 1830; Issue 2122.

[390] Uriah's daughter Amy Moxley Brodribb was born in London in early 1843: England & Wales births 1837-2006 - 1843/1/Bermondsey/London/England/IV/7.

[391] TNA 1851 EWS Census HO107/1530/220/24. Uriah probably worked for Colman's mustard manufactory, which was situated at 108 Cannon Street in the 1850s, adjacent to Walbrook.

[392] A.A. Brodribb and H.C.G. Matthew, 'Bergne, John Brodribb (1800–1873)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2202, accessed 22 Dec 2015].

[393] T.H. Sanderson and H.C.G. Matthew, 'Bergne, Sir John Henry Gibbs (1842–1908)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30724, accessed 22 Dec 2015].

London was popular with the wealthy professional classes, and was certainly a more prestigious address than the Brodribbs' abode in the City. His son, William Jackson Brodribb (bap.1829, d. 1905) was ten years older than Irving, and also experienced a very different upbringing. He was educated privately and afterwards at King's College, London and St John's College, Cambridge before becoming a clergyman.[394] There is no evidence that Samuel Brodribb and his family were acquainted with either of these branches of the extended family, but it is likely that they knew of them. Literary historian Eileen Cleere has explored the meaning of 'uncles' in Victorian fiction, arguing that they were a 'familial trope fundamental to narratives of social and economic exchange' in the nineteenth century.[395] Uncles frequently appeared in nineteenth-century literature and culture to provide social and economic support in place of the father. Although these extended kin were not in Irving's immediate social milieu, they were a latent part of his network, and it is worth speculating what effect an awareness of these wealthy distant relations might have had on the young Irving. Knowing that male relatives were providing a different social and financial experience for their families perhaps enabled Irving to imagine a different path and social possibilities for his own life.

Irving's friends were from lower middle-class families too. His best friend at school was Edward Plumbridge (1838-1917), the son of a fruit and nut merchant. The large Plumbridge family lived above the warehouse of their father's business in Botolph Lane, a ten-minute walk from Irving's house. Irving used to play amongst the nuts in the stores with his friend.[396] Plumbridge followed his father into the fruit and nut business in the City, and eventually retired to the suburbs in the 1890s.[397] Charles Ford (1837-1910) was another close teenage friend of Irving, whom he met during his time as a clerk at Thacker & Co. Born in Shropshire to the son of a provincial solicitor, Ford never left his lower middle-class roots, drifting from one clerking job to the next before eventually becoming a wholesale bookseller. He moved with his family to the suburbs of London, first to Islington in 1861 and eventually to Bromley by 1901. Unlike Irving, Ford remained

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[394] A.A. Brodribb and M.C. Curthoys, 'Brodribb, William Jackson (Bap. 1829, d. 1905)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32083, accessed 22 Dec 2015].

[395] Eileen Cleere, *Avuncularism: Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 15.

[396] Austin Brereton, *The Life of Henry Irving* (London: Longmans Green, 1908), 9–10.

[397] TNA 1861 ESW Census HO107/1531/57/9; TNA 1891 ESW Census RG12/633/73/12.

fairly static and conservative in his outlook and ambition. Irving does not appear to have stayed in touch with either of these two former friends in later life, despite having corresponded with Ford in the early part of his acting career. Perhaps it became too difficult to incorporate them into the polite, educated milieu that Irving had entered.[398]

Significantly, Brereton's 1883 biography does not mention Ford or Plumbridge, but it does mention two other men as his youthful companions, Edward Clarke and Edward Henry Palmer (1840-1882). Again this was not wholly accurate, but referencing these men was far more prestigious. By 1883 Edward Clarke had an illustrious career as a Q.C. and M.P. Edward Palmer had died in the previous year, but had excelled as a professor in oriental languages at Cambridge University and was a well-known explorer and government agent in the Middle East. Palmer's career in particular would have been regarded as exotic during a period when there was intense public interest in Islamic and Asian cultures.[399] By mentioning these names, therefore, the implication was that Irving had long-standing friends who had become politically and culturally powerful. Brereton deliberately selected these two eminent men to position Irving as a perceptive selector of friends during his youth: 'Some indication of his wisdom in choosing companions, is given by the fact that at this time two of his close friends were the late Professor Edward Henry Palmer, then a clerk in the house of Messrs. Hill & Underwood, of Eastcheap, and Edward Clarke, now a Queen's Counsel and Member of Parliament for Plymouth'.[400] By suggesting that Irving was destined to move amongst great men, Brereton was again naturalising Irving as exceptional from an early age and thereby giving authority to his position in polite society. The truth was, however, that Irving did not know Edward Clarke in his youth – they met later in life when Irving was an actor.[401] Edward Palmer grew up in Cambridge, moving to London in 1856 at the age of sixteen to train as a junior clerk with a firm of wine merchants. It was at this stage that Irving and Palmer appear to have become acquainted, although their friendship must have been brief as Irving left London

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[398] Brereton, *The Life*, 10 mentions Plumbridge: 'The boys left school in the same year, 1851, and, as is often the case with those whose walks of life are divergent, the young friends drifted apart'. Last known contact between Ford and Irving was 1860: Henry Irving, 'To Charles Ford', July 1860, BTMA 1963/G/49, THM.

[399] Stephen Calloway, ed., *The Cult of Beauty* (London: V&A Publishing, 2011).

[400] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 12.

[401] Clarke, *Story of My Life*, 24.

in September that year.[402] It is not clear whether Brereton was aware of these inaccuracies when he wrote the 1883 biography, but since Irving was involved in its editing he himself would have been aware that it was stretching the truth somewhat.

Religion opened Irving to a wider social network in his teenage years and provided him with more male role models. In the nineteenth century, church and chapel were sites for making social and business connections as well as for worship. Irving's mother Mary, like her sister Sarah in Cornwall, was brought up a Methodist. Irving's father was baptised in the Independent chapel at Chelwood near Clutton, and in London joined the congregation of the minister Thomas Binney (1798-1874) at King's Weigh House, Eastcheap, ten minutes walk from the Brodribbs' home. Binney was an influential figure in non-conformity in the mid-Victorian years.[403] The most popular of his eighty-two publications was his lecture *Is it Possible to Make the Best of Both Worlds?* (1853), which sold 31,000 copies in its first year and by 1856 was in its tenth edition. The King's Weigh House congregation was made up of young city businessmen and members of the middle classes. So well known was Binney that in a letter written in 1854 to a member of the Warminster branch of the Brodribbs, Mary Ann Wilkins (dates unknown), Irving gave no introduction to Binney in a story about a gift his congregation gave him.[404] Irving clearly admired the success that Binney had achieved, and showed him what it was possible to become in the field of religion. Although Irving had attended chapel at King's Weigh House, he began to go to another congregation with his mother, the Congregational Albion Chapel at London Wall.[405] It is not clear why his mother moved to this chapel, but Irving indicated in the letter to Wilkins that his mother had first heard the minister of the Albion Chapel, Reverend John Macfarlane, preaching at King's Weigh House for Binney.[406] It is therefore likely that they moved to Albion Chapel under the auspices of Binney,

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[402] Walter Besant, *The Life and Achievements of Edward Henry Palmer* (London: John Murray, 1883), 16–17.

[403] R. Tudur Jones, 'Binney , Thomas (1798–1874)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2421, accessed 22 Dec 2015].

[404] Henry Irving, 'To Mary Ann Wilkins', 29 July 1854, Box 7, Folder 30, HLC, http://ccdl.libraries.claremont.edu/col/phl.

[405] Kings Weigh House Congregational Church, London: LMA/N/C/62 NRA 7562 GLRO misc; Albion Chapel, Moorgate LMA/4334/A/001-005.

[406] On 29 March 1853 Rev. John Macfarlane unanimously requested to preside as Deacon at the Congregational Meeting at Albion Chapel, Moorgate after the previous leader retired. LMA/4334/A/001.

whom Irving described as 'like a father' to Macfarlane. At this new chapel, John Macfarlane (b.1830?) became another significant male figure in Irving's youth, and had an impact on his growing sense of self. Irving expressed admiration for Macfarlane, describing him as 'very superior. He is only 25 years old, but exceedingly clever'.[407] This was another context in which Irving was exposed to the possibilities of movement between groups and was learning that his network could expand in different directions.

Like his schoolmaster William Pinches, Macfarlane encouraged Irving to expand his intellectual horizons and to engage in self-improving activities. Irving was first exposed to ideas on self-improvement during his early years in Cornwall amongst the Methodist community. In London the opportunities for engaging in self-improvement were vast due to the burgeoning arts and cultural scene and the growing number of institutions for adult education. Macfarlane helped Irving to become familiar with them. To Mrs Wilkins Irving wrote that Macfarlane had taken him 'to see several of the principle sights in London, such as the Royal Academy, Polytechnic &c'.[408] Clearly Macfarlane was acting as a mentor to Irving, encouraging him to engage in culture and the arts. The second quarter of the nineteenth century saw an increase in the number of adult educational and cultural venues opening to the public as 'rational recreation', the idea that culture could 'improve' the lower classes, became ever more influential.[409] The Great Exhibition of 1851 significantly shifted thinking on the potential market for leisure activities. An unprecedented number of visitors came to the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park – six million people from all social classes – to enjoy the spectacle and the cultural experience of the largest exhibition the world had ever seen. The idea, therefore, that large numbers of people could be encouraged to visit cultural venues was new in the 1850s, and in this context institutions such as the British Museum and the National Gallery were recast as educating and civilising agencies in society. They became places of

[407] Irving, 'Wilkins 29 July 1854'.

[408] Ibid.

[409] Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); Francis O'Gorman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Richard N. Price, 'The Working Men's Club Movement and Victorian Social Reform Ideology', *Victorian Studies* 15, no. 2 (1 December 1971): 117–47.

respectable secular public gathering.[410] Macfarlane took Irving to visit some of these cultural venues in the summer of 1854, when he was sixteen years old. Urban sites like these provided another arena in which Irving could observe and aspire to other ways of being. Had Irving remained in rural Cornwall he would not have had these experiences.

Adult educational institutions, which included working men's clubs, mechanics institutes and others, were an important aspect of rational recreation.[411] Evening classes at these institutions became popular with some sections of the working class and the lower middle class, who aspired to a better education than their limited schooling had provided them with. At these educational institutions young men could attend lectures on a wide range of subjects, learn skills such as bookkeeping and public speaking, and access books and newspapers through the library facilities. The moral aspects linked to the idea of self-culture – that God will help those who help themselves – made these institutions particularly popular in evangelical circles, and it is no surprise that Macfarlane encouraged Irving to engage in these activities. The London Polytechnic, where Macfarlane took Irving, was a large hall dedicated to popular science located on Regent Street. When it first opened in 1838, its aim was to provide the public with 'a practical knowledge of the various arts and branches of science connected with Manufactures, Mining Operations, and Rural Economy'.[412] This was one of the famous sites of adult education in London in the 1850s, but there were plenty of smaller venues, and several very close to Irving's home including Crosby Hall on Bishopsgate and Sussex Hall in Leadenhall Street.

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[410] Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995); Christopher Whitehead, *The Public Art Museum in Nineteenth Century Britain: The Development of the National Gallery* (London: Routledge, 2017); Paul Barlow and Colin Trodd, eds., *Governing Cultures: Art Institutions in Victorian London* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2000); Kate Hill, *Culture and Class in English Public Museums, 1850-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution: C. 1780-c. 1880* (London: Routledge, 2016); Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (London: Belknap Press, 1978).

[411] J.F.C. Harrison, *A History of the Working Men's College, 1854-1954* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954); P.H. Gosden, *Self-Help: Voluntary Associations in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Batsford, 1973); J. F. C Harrison, *Learning and Living 1790-1960: A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961); J.F.C. Harrison, ed., *Utopianism and Education; Robert Owen and the Owenites* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1968); Edward Royle, 'Mechanics' Institutes and the Working Classes, 1840-1860', *The Historical Journal* 14, no. 2 (1971): 305–21.

[412] Prospectus 1837, The Royal Polytechnic Institution 1837-1881, University of Westminster archives GB 1753 UWA RPI.

The reality of Irving's working life, however, demonstrated the difficulties in fulfilling the cultural ideal of self-improvement. In a letter to Mrs Wilkins in 1854 Irving wrote:

> I am still in the same office, though I cannot be comfortable whilst I remain from ½ past 9 to 7. I am in reality inclined more to retire to rest, at the close of the day, than study, however I am obliged to apply as I know this is my most advantageous time.[413]

Despite finding it hard to muster energy for self-improving activities, Irving did join an elocution class in 1853 at the age of fifteen. The City Elocution Class first met under a railway arch in Gould Square, close to Fenchurch Street before moving to Sussex Hall.[414] Elocution classes were popular with lower middle-class young men who wanted to learn how to speak with a 'correct' accent and pronunciation. The weekly classes were led by Henry Thomas (dates unknown), one of many teachers who took advantage of the growing popularity for elocution training amongst the aspiring lower middle class. Chapter one examined the increasing amount of behavioural advice literature being published in the early to mid-Victorian period, which stressed the importance of having correct accent and pronunciation for success in life. Irving was clearly aware by this stage of the importance of speech and behaviour, and took deliberate action to improve his accent and pronunciation. Charles Dyall (b. 1831?), who later became the curator of the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, also attended the class with Irving. His recollections of the system of teaching are recorded in Brereton's 1908 biography:

> The only teaching was by mutual criticism; the members helping each other to pick up dropped 'h's' and put them in their proper places; pointing out wrong accents, bad pronunciation, inappropriate gesture, awkward positions of the hands and feet, etc.[415]

The language that Dyall used here echoes the description of the habits of vulgar speech in advice literature with its focus on 'bad' pronunciation, 'inappropriate' gesture,

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[413] Irving, 'Wilkins 29 July 1854'.

[414] On Sussex Hall in the 1850s see Geoffrey Cantor, 'Sussex Hall (1845-59) and the Revival of Learning Among London Jewry', *Jewish Historical Studies* 38 (2002): 105–23.

[415] Brereton, *The Life*, 13.

'awkward' bodily movements, and 'dropped h's'. This was Victorian self-improvement in its most Smilesian form, where groups of disadvantaged young men came together to study and help each other.

There can be little doubt that Irving's accent was different to his friends who had grown up in London.[416] Irving would certainly have had a regional accent when he first arrived in London because he had spent his early years living in the West Country and in a working-class rural community in Cornwall. It is likely that his mother had a Cornish accent, and his father a regional accent from Somerset. Irving's first extended daily exposure to a 'correct' polite accent and pronunciation was with his schoolmaster William Pinches, who whetted his appetite for elocution and provided Irving with an early model for his voice. But Irving realised that he had to keep up this practice after he left school in order to train himself to speak correctly. Evidence of Irving's regional accent comes from a long-time friend the journalist Joseph Hatton (1841-1907). Writing in *Grand Magazine* after the actor's death in December 1905, Hatton wrote that occasional accidental slippages in Irving's accent revealed his roots:

> Though of Cornish blood, Irving was born and received his first impressions in Somersetshire, which he certainly often betrayed, in emotional passages on the stage, by the suppression of the full round note that belongs to the vowel. West-countrymen generally give the consonant more importance than the vowel.[417]

Clearly conscious of his accent and diction, the sixteen-year-old Irving found another source of help to train his voice – the actor William Hoskins (1816-1886). It is not clear how Irving found Hoskins, but it is possible that Hoskins was making some extra income as an elocution teacher to supplement his acting salary.[418] Hoskins was born into an elite family in Newton Solney, Derbyshire, one of ten children of Abraham Hoskins (1759-1842). Hoskins' grandfather, Abraham Hoskins (1729-1805) had been a prominent lawyer and figure of status in the local area, and had made a large fortune. With this he had built

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[416] On London accents see Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century: 'A Human Awful Wonder of God'* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), 111–13.

[417] Joseph Hatton, 'Henry Irving', *The Grand Magazine*, December 1905, 708.

[418] According to one obituary, when Hoskins retired from the stage he became a teacher of elocution 'in which capacity he has always been regarded as a master.' *The Era*, Saturday, November 13, 1886; Issue 2512.

a country house in the Italianate style, Newton Hall, which passed to William's father in 1805. Hoskins was a gentleman by birth and received an elite education before going to Cambridge University. He was intended for the Bar, but developed a taste for the stage, and at the age of eighteen he became an actor and playwright.[419] He started his career in the provinces, and by 1842 was the principal tragedian at the Theatre Royal, Norwich, before heading to London to join the company of Samuel Phelps (1804-1878) at Sadlers' Wells Theatre. Hoskins later joined the Olympic Theatre company under the management of William Farren junior (1825-1908), and it was during this period that he taught Irving, probably at some point in 1854 when Irving was aged sixteen.[420] Because Hoskins was a gentleman he was well placed to instruct Irving on how to speak and carry himself. Irving claimed he had hour-long lessons from eight in the morning at Hoskins' house before he began his day's work as a clerk.

Hoskins was undoubtedly a huge influence on the young Irving, and must have been a key inspiration in his decision to become an actor. As Irving's senior by more than twenty years Hoskins could be described as Irving's first patron, mentoring and looking out for his younger charge and providing opportunities and introductions to key people. The 1883 biography suggests the importance of this early relationship: Hoskins was 'struck with the earnestness and comparative efficiency of the lad, and gave him assistance far beyond the ordinary lessons'.[421] This concept of patronage, which chapters four and five examine, was an important part of Irving's success. Hoskins introduced Irving to Samuel Phelps at Sadlers' Wells, who offered him a position in his company. But Irving rejected Phelps' offer because, he claimed, he wanted to get experience of acting via the traditional route with provincial companies, as Hoskins himself had done. Given that Phelps was one of the leading actor-managers in London at this stage it is perplexing that Irving did not take up his offer, and is perhaps questionable in its truth; but mention of this offer in Irving's biography once again set him up as being destined for success from the start, and reinforced his reputation. In 1856 Hoskins emigrated to Australia and requested that Irving join him, but Irving declined. Hoskins then provided him with a note of introduction to E.D. Davis (dates unknown), the manager of the Lyceum Theatre in

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[419] William Henry Hoskins, *Extremes; or De Valencourt. A Tragedy, in Five Acts.* (Norwich, 1842).

[420] 'Death of Mr William Hoskins', *The Argus*, 29 September 1886, 6.

[421] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 13.

Sunderland, where Irving secured his first acting job in September 1856.[422] It is likely that the discussions during Irving's lessons with Hoskins about his own provincial training and experience inspired Irving's course of action. Certainly Irving had a sense of purpose and knowledge about the theatre world in his final preparations before his move to Sunderland, and it is very likely that Hoskins taught him much of his nascent knowledge of the Stage.

We cannot know to what extent Irving styled himself on William Pinches, John Macfarlane or William Hoskins, three significant male figures in his adolescence, but Irving was certainly self-consciously developing and building up a level of sophistication in his identity from this wider circle and the resources around him during this time. This development is particularly obvious in three letters to Mrs Wilkins over the course of four years from 1852 to 1856. The letter of 1852, written when Irving was fourteen, contains language and ideas which hint at his developing awareness of 'correct' social behaviour as well as wider political and social ideas. Responding to Mrs Wilkins' previous correspondence, Irving thanked her using polite language: 'I feel very much obliged to you for your kind invitation for me to visit you next summer, & if I get a Holiday, I am sure I shall be most happy to do so.'[423] Irving also discussed his new job, demonstrating an awareness of his longer-term career prospects: 'I have left Mr Paterson's to take a situation in a large Public office, which I think will prove much more beneficial to me in after life'. He then discussed the new Crystal Palace at Sydenham and offered opinion on its construction. Irving then gave his views on the funeral of the Duke of Wellington, which he witnessed, boldly stating that he was 'one of the most illustrious statesmen, & the greatest warrior the world ever produced'. Irving quoted at length on the funeral from the *Illustrated London News*, a weekly newspaper-cum-family-magazine, demonstrating his engagement in reading and current affairs. The fact that the Brodribb household had a copy of this newspaper is again indicative of their social status, as it was a popular publication aimed at a lower middle-class readership.[424]

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[422] Ibid.

[423] Irving, 'Wilkins Nov 1852'.

[424] Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, eds., *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (Gent: Academia Press, 2009), 301–3.

In a letter to Mrs Wilkins two years later in 1854, Irving again demonstrated his growing awareness of his place in society. His written language started to take on a more poetic and imaginative style, as he described how it would feel to take his summer holidays in Warminster with Mrs Wilkins and her family and friends:

> You cannot imagine the feelings of a poor pent up Londoner, on waking on a bright Autumnal morning, the gorgeous sun peering through the window, the Lark warbling forth its praise to Heavens, and the voices of the merry children, laughing in the Street, indeed everything calculated to fill his soul with boundless rapture.[425]

Irving continued this description at length, and demonstrated his learning by slipping into the prose a quote from the poem *The Mariner's Dream* by the poet and playwright William Dimond (1784-1837?). Irving also demonstrated his awareness of the value of engaging in cultural activities, urging Mrs Wilkins to come to the capital to take part in them herself, 'as there are innumerable attractions for London at the present time, one of which is the Crystal Palace'.[426] Irving proudly told Mrs Wilkins that he had frequently been to John Macfarlane's house, discussed Macfarlane's marriage and indicated his growing ability to discriminate socially:

> He [Macfarlane] has since married one of Mr Binney's congregation, a Deacon's daughter, who I believe is in every way calculated for a minister's wife. I have just received an invitation to visit them, when I shall have an opportunity of judging for myself.[427]

In this extract Irving demonstrated to Mrs Wilkins his increasing independence: not only was he being invited to the home of a senior figure in his community but also he was learning how to make social calls.

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[425] Henry Irving, 'To Mary Ann Wilkins', c 1854, quoted in Laurence Irving, *Henry Irving: The Actor and His World* (London: Faber, 1951), 52-3.

[426] Ibid. Irving was referring to the reconstructed Crystal Palace in South London.

[427] Irving, 'Wilkins 29 July 1854'.

Two years later in 1856, when Irving was eighteen, his developing sense of himself as a young man capable of critical thinking and opinion is even more evident in a letter to Mrs Wilkins:

> I must thank you for the paper & book you were kind enough to send me. I was much entertained with both. The former is a very nice journal & I wish it success; I had no notion that you had one in Warminster, there seems little original in it, but it is a pleasing summary… A correspondent does not write much in favour of the intellectuality of your town. What is your opinion concerning it? I don't know (but my knowledge is very limited) of any town, the size of yours, where cultivation of the social and intellectual faculties are more encouraged. I thought you were far advanced.[428]

In this extract Irving positioned himself as an 'intellectual' and 'cultivated' Londoner in contrast to provincial dwellers, demonstrating his awareness of the prevailing view that London was more socially and culturally advanced than the rest of the country. He slighted the local journal Mrs Wilkins sent him as having little originality, and brought into question the level of intellectual advancement in Warminster. Also in this letter he discussed the 'solemn step' which 'requires mature consideration' of joining a church, and then went on to discuss religious and political current affairs:

> The recent opening of Parliament will shortly create intense interest in the English nation. Evangelical & Political Events of no common order are brewing. The great Evangelical question is with reference to the opening of public exhibitions such as the British Museum, Natl. Gallery, & Crystal Palace on Sundays. Dickens's new work (the first number of which had a circulation of 35,000) is written in favour of the opening & he puts forward in a very ingenious manner (though under a cloak) the advantage arising from such a step. Dickens is a moralist but nothing else. Many Members of parliament, the leading literary men & a great mass of the population are in favour of it.[429]

By this time Irving had expanded his reading material, indicating that he was up to date with the latest novel by Charles Dickens, *Little Dorritt*.[430] Irving's opinion on Dickens and

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[428] Henry Irving, 'To Mary Ann Wilkins', 17 February 1856, Box 7, Folder 31, HLC, http://ccdl.libraries.claremont.edu/col/phl.

[429] Ibid.

[430] The first monthly installment of Dickens' *Little Dorritt* was published in December 1855.

his views of political and religious current affairs were boldly and confidently stated, and suggest he had started to listen to, if not engage in, intellectual discussions about these subjects with other adults.

By demonstrating to Mrs Wilkins that he was engaging in cultural activities, serious political conversations and 'intellectual' arguments, Irving was speaking the language of lower-middle class self-improvement to someone similarly positioned in the hierarchy who understood its significance.[431] Irving was increasing in confidence and sophistication and by this stage it is possible that he had learnt to pronounce words with the 'correct' accent. But the reality was that Irving's efforts at self-improvement during his teenage years did not provide him with the resources needed for him to be regarded as a gentleman: chapter five will demonstrate that it was not until his thirties that Irving learnt the necessary confidence and ease of manner to pass convincingly in polite society. Self-improvement through adult education in itself, therefore, was not the enabling factor for significant social mobility.

Nevertheless, in the 1883 biography Brereton suggested that self-making was the reason for Irving's success. He pictured Irving as a young man with an unusual level of determination and application:

> [Irving] resolutely set himself to accomplish his will. Whilst the other boys of his age and acquaintance were amusing themselves with boyish games, all the resolution of this lad was devoted to preparation for his future calling. He spent the whole of the leisure-time possible in the hard routine of the life of a city clerk, in learning plays and poems, and in studying the art of acting as much as was in his power.[432]

Although it is clear that Irving did engage in self-improving activities, we know from his letter to Mrs Wilkins in 1852 in which he stated that he was 'more inclined to retire to rest, at the close of the day, than study' that this is an exaggerated depiction of his

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[431] The Warminster branch of the Brodribb family were minor provincial professionals and tradesmen. Joanna Brodribb, Mary Ann's sister, married Samuel's brother William Brodribb, therefore reconnecting the distant branches. of the family. This connection must have been the reason why Irving affectionately referred to Mrs Wilkins as 'Aunt Wilkins'. See Thomas Brodribb, *Notes of the Brodribbs: An Old Family of Somerset* (Kew, Vic: T. Brodribb, 1916).

[432] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 6.

efforts during his teenage years.[433] But Brereton repeatedly depicted Irving as a determined and hardworking youth in the 1883 biography to suggest his success was due to his efforts at self-making:

> There are not many boys of thirteen who earn their living, and out of the few pence allotted for their daily nourishment save something to buy books; who rise at four in the morning, and walk from the city to bathe in the river; who consider tea and bread and butter an excellent meal, even for dinner; and who, after a long day in the office, spend several hours in study. This is the way young Irving lived for several years. It was a severe training, but it created that fund of indomitable energy which contributed so much to the success of after-years.[434]

Just like the eponymous hero in the popular Victorian novel of self-making, *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), Irving was depicted as working night and day to achieve his success. The focus on Irving's healthy young body and mind in this passage reflects ideals of Victorian masculinity in late nineteenth century Britain, and again serves to position Irving as a legitimate hero.[435] It is not possible to verify whether Irving did in fact get up at four a.m. to go down to the river to wash and exercise, that his meals largely consisted of bread and butter, and that he spent several hours in study every day. But it seems unlikely because by his own admission he was too tired to study when he got home from work. Rather, this appears to be a deliberately constructed image of Irving as a genuine example of a self-made man deserving of respect, in order to counter the idea that his success was down to luck. This was a charge that had been frequently levelled at Irving, and one that Brereton was at pains to refute by providing an anonymous testimonial from the 'pen of a gentleman well known in the art world': 'People who are profoundly ignorant on the subject, often ascribe Irving's wonderful success to luck, accident; and his success is frequently characterised as "a fluke": the world little knows how hard he has toiled up the ladder of fame'.[436] But this portrait of Irving as a self-made man was more than merely an attempt to garner respect: he constantly needed to justify his status as a

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[433] Irving, 'Wilkins Nov 1852'.

[434] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 6–7.

[435] John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), chapter 8.

[436] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 10.

gentleman and to answer criticisms of his social background and education. This kind of narrative served to position Irving as a legitimate member of polite society.

Conclusion

This chapter, like the previous one, has suggested ways in which Irving's experiences in his youth moulded his personality and equipped him for his later extraordinary achievements. I have focused in some detail on the contexts of home, school and chapel in the diverse environments of London in order to trace the social and cultural influences on Irving's developing identity as a young man. Three men in particular had inspired him, his schoolteacher, his preacher and his elocution tutor, who provided him with knowledge, resources and ideas to imagine himself differently. Just as in Cornwall, ideas of self-improvement were strong in his lower-middle class urban community, and Irving was able to access resources to try to improve his education, speech and bodily comportment. The fact that Irving sought to make these changes suggests an awareness of his own social position, his deficiencies in accent and comportment, and a level of social aspiration. But self-improving activities could only go so far, as chapter five will demonstrate. It was not until Irving had been embedded in polite culture for a number of years that he was able to appear as a convincing gentleman.

Another aspect clearly emerging once again in this chapter is the difference between the records of Irving's youth, and the portrait of this time in his life represented in the 1883 biography. Brereton wrote out of Irving's story aspects which would expose him to criticism from the snobbish elite with whom he circulated in the 1880s. No mention is made of his home life, his kin, or his religious activities. Other aspects of his experience such as his education and his network of friends are exaggerated, clipped or told in half-truths. Instead, focus is given to a depiction of Irving as a man destined for greatness, with innate artistic talent, sound education, a strong work ethic and excellent judgement from an early age. I have suggested that Irving felt compelled to present this picture because of the perceived threat from social climbers to 'legitimate' members of polite society, and that even though Irving had acculturated into polite society by 1883, he had to work constantly to legitimise his status. The criticisms Irving received about his

education provide evidence of the discrimination he suffered in polite society, including some fierce attacks on his treatment of Shakespeare. Cartoons lampooned his education and claims to 'intellectuality'. Again, this criticism of Irving's education demonstrated the perceived difference in the cultures of the vulgar and the polite, and was another example of the ways in which polite society policed its membership.

At what point Irving started to think about a career on the stage is not known, but in London he had the opportunity to attend the theatre, something that would have been impossible in rural Cornwall. Irving began to visit the theatre in the early 1850s around the age of twelve. His father accompanied Irving on his first visit to the theatre when they went to see Samuel Phelps play *Hamlet* at Sadler's Wells. Brereton's 1883 biography described the effect this had on Irving: 'The boy never forgot this performance, and often since then he has told the friends of his later life of the profound impression it made upon his mind.'[437] The spectacle of *Hamlet* in the Sadler's Wells theatre ignited Irving's imagination, and his passion for the theatre continued throughout his teens. Indeed the theatre became another site of sociability for Irving, where he met and talked to new people who shared his passions and interests. It was on one of his visits to the theatre that he met Edward Palmer, who became a professor of oriental languages at Cambridge University.[438] Irving's first acting job was in Sunderland, hundreds of miles away from his home, his friends and his family, but he had learnt to be open and resilient to change. Irving had also learnt through his teenage years the value of having male supporters to guide and help him. Chapter four focuses on Irving's experiences in the early part of his acting career and the men he befriended, to demonstrate how crucial these friendships were for his professional and social advancement.

[437] Ibid., 12.

[438] Elizabeth Baigent, 'Palmer, Edward Henry (1840–1882)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn, Oct 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21180, accessed 8 May 2016].

Chapter Four:

Irving's Early Career in the Theatre

This chapter charts the first ten years of Irving's acting career from 1856 when he left London to train on the provincial stage until 1866 when he returned to London to act on the West End stage. During this period Irving expanded his professional network and made significant friendships with two influential actors who helped him to develop his career. The first part of the chapter considers the structure and practices of the mid-Victorian theatre. Entering upon a career in the theatre was important for Irving's social rise because the working practices of the stage and the diverse social constituency of the theatrical world provided him with significant opportunities that he would not have had as an ordinary clerk in London. However, acting did not provide a general route for social mobility for all young men of Irving's age and background: his achievements were remarkable rather than standard and it was the particular circumstances of his life that enabled his professional rise. When Irving began his career on the stage in 1856 he was in competition with thousands of other actors for work.[439] Success in the form of high financial rewards and widespread fame came to just a small proportion of actors employed in the industry during the nineteenth century. Reaching this pinnacle was hard to achieve, and a precarious working life full of drudgery and periods of unemployment was the reality for most actors. Although Irving eventually ended up on London's West End stage in 1866, his path was never certain and he came very close to destitution shortly before his big break.

The second part of the chapter explores the significance of the professional networks that Irving built during these critical years. I examine some of the more significant people in Irving's network and the impact they had on his life. In particular I will focus on his two staunchest supporters, the actors John Lawrence Toole (1830-1906) and Charles James Mathews (1803-1878). The significance of the Victorian practice of 'friendship' is important here, because these two influential 'friends' were crucial for

[439] Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Croom Helm, 1978).

Irving's professional rise. The next chapter demonstrates how these men supported Irving emotionally and socially, but this chapter focuses on how they helped him to build his professional network and to find work. Their role in Irving's early career is downplayed in Brereton's 1883 biography; once again it maintains strategic silences about the realities of Irving's situation. Irving is presented as a righteous self-made man striving ceaselessly in the face of adversity; he is aligned with the positive Victorian cultural idea of self-making and the liberal credo of 'independence'. This method of reading Irving's public story against the realities of his life points to the prevailing cultures of class which made it necessary for him to construct his history in such a way.

The focus on Toole and Mathews in this chapter does further work in relation to my particular argument about Victorian theatre and overarching claims about social mobility. The two men had very different biographies, and I provide their life stories in some detail, showing the similarities and differences between their circumstances and Irving's. These mini biographical case studies serve two purposes in my argument: firstly, they provide in-depth examples to demonstrate how socially diverse the mid-Victorian theatre was; secondly, they show again how significant the particular circumstances of individuals' lives were for their experiences. Sources for this part of Irving's career are again less readily available because he had not yet achieved the fame and success of his later years, so tracing the exchanges in these relationships has been challenging. Capturing the fleeting moments of connection and constructing their significance has been possible by piecing together a range of sources from the second half of the nineteenth century. These sources include provincial theatre records and newspaper reports tracing the protagonists' locations across time and space, anecdotes from interviews in late nineteenth-century journals and in auto/biographies, and details from Irving's correspondence. Although the evidence available for Irving during this early part of his career is piecemeal, prior work of historians has enabled me to provide some contextual detail of Irving's life in the Victorian theatre. Combining these histories and sources demonstrates the significance of the context of the mid-Victorian theatre to Irving's experiences and suggests reasons for his particular mobility.

The mid-Victorian theatre

Actors came from a variety of social backgrounds throughout the nineteenth century, which meant that Irving's lower middle-class roots did not prevent his entry into the profession. In his study of the Victorian acting profession, theatre historian Michael Baker investigated the social backgrounds and schooling of nearly one hundred prominent actors who made their professional debuts between 1800 and 1860.[440] His research reveals that the majority of new recruits from non-theatrical backgrounds came from lower middle-class families and had basic levels of education. Irving's social background and schooling, therefore, were typical of the non-theatrical entrants into the acting profession in the first half of the nineteenth century who became successful. Baker's study also shows that many entrants to the profession had come from polite backgrounds and had received a level of education typical of gentlemen (see chapter 3). The actor Sir William Don (1825-1862), for example, was the son of the 6th Baronet of Newtondon, and had attended Eton. The actor and playwright Dion Boucicault (1822-1890) was the son of a banker and was educated privately and then at the University of London. Other actors with public school education included Charles Kean (1811-1868), William Macready (1793-1873), Charles Young (1777-1856) and Henry Marston (1804-1883). The established narrative of early to mid nineteenth-century theatre is of the decline in the status of drama, audiences and actors, before the 'rise of respectability' in the late nineteenth century.[441] Historians have started to challenge this narrative, and this study also contributes to that challenge by suggesting that the social status of actors at the top of the profession remained constant throughout the nineteenth century.[442] A closer look at prominent actors and their networks reveals a different picture from the generalisations that some historians have made about the low social status of actors during this period.

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[440] Ibid.

[441] George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre, 1792-1914: A Survey*, 2nd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Russell Jackson, *Victorian Theatre* (London: Black, 1989).

[442] J.S. Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage: Marriage, Management and the Mapping of Gender in London, 1830-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jim Davis, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840-1880* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2001).

Before he went into the theatre Irving was aware of his own social position, and understood that he had the potential for social mobility through the acting profession. In a letter to his relative Mary Ann Wilkins (dates unknown) on 18 August 1856, written just before Irving left London for his first acting job at the Lyceum Theatre in Sunderland, he expressed his view on the status of actors:

> As regards the profession which I have chosen I consider it one of the if not the most intellectual there are – actors are created like poets, you can never make one; of course I don't say everybody on the stage is really an actor, there are few. Too many enter it from idle motives & many mistake their calling, but the names of Shakespeare, Garrick, Kemble, Macready, & many others show that they were & are the companions of the master spirits of the ages & rank as gentlemen & scholars among Royalty & aristocracy. A person may be as moral & good in that as any other walk of life. There is much prejudice against it in our circle of society & that is wearing off as the world grows wiser, but in the higher ones, they are considered equals.[443]

In this extract Irving demonstrated a familiarity with the acting profession and a level of knowledge about its social constituency and history of individual actors that he must surely have acquired from conversations with other people. It is very possible that he developed his opinions from the actor William Hoskins (1816-1886), his recent mentor and tutor of elocution.[444] Although Irving did not label his own social position, he recognised that there were 'higher' social circles above him and his family. This extract also demonstrates his awareness of a taboo around actors and the Victorian theatre amongst his social circle, as he attempted to justify his chosen career to Mrs Wilkins. Irving therefore endeavoured to counter the opposition to the stage that he knew his family had. By focusing on the 'intellectual' aspects of drama, Irving spoke to their lower middle-class aspirations for self-making through education. Irving name-checked the prominent actors most known for their gentility from his own and previous generations to suggest his class aspirations, and to distance himself from the less salubrious aspects of the theatre world. To underscore his argument further Irving also mentioned the

[443] Henry Irving, 'To Mary Ann Wilkins', 18 August 1856, Box 7, Folder 14, HLC, http://ccdl.libraries.claremont.edu/col/phl.

[444] It is also possible that Irving acquired the go-to guide for aspirants to the acting profession, Leman Rede, *The Road to the Stage* (London: J. Onwhyn, 1836).

bastion of legitimate Victorian theatre, Shakespeare, against whom few had moral concerns.

Public discussions about the morality of the theatre had been circulating since at least the eighteenth century, and had a fresh impetus from the early 1830s when the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Drama investigated the position of dramatic copyright and theatrical licensing. The tenor of the parliamentary questions and debates contributed to a widely held public view that the theatre was corrupt, and that much of the drama was frivolous, indecent and posed a threat to morality. Furthermore, the acting profession had a reputation for sexual vice and dissolution that was at odds with the prevailing moral codes of the middle classes. Evangelical Christians, particularly dissenting groups, led anti-theatrical opinion, and their polemics were repeated in sermons and in the press throughout Irving's childhood and adolescent years.[445] Irving's mother's strict religious views led her to oppose her son's career choice. In Brereton's 1883 biography Charles Dyall (b. 1831), who later became the curator of the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool and who knew Irving as a teenager in London, described her opposition:

> Henry Irving's mother, like many other mothers, had a great dread of her son taking to the stage. I used frequently to visit at her house for the purpose of rehearsing the scenes in which John and I were to act together… On one occasion she begged me very earnestly to dissuade him from thinking of the stage as a profession, and, having read much of the vicissitudes of actors' lives, their hardships and the precariousness of their employment, I did my best to impress this view upon him.[446]

Although Irving was certainly influenced by the strong arguments of his religious upbringing, he also pushed against the righteous views of his friends and family. In Brereton's 1883 biography Irving recounted a visit to the theatre in his youth:

> He found his way to the Adelphi, and sat in the gallery with a feeling that he was very wicked, and that the gallery would probably fall into the pit for his special

[445] Baker, *The Rise*, chapter 2; Richard Foulkes, *Church and Stage in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[446] Austin Brereton, *Henry Irving: A Biographical Sketch* (London: David Bogue, 1883), 10.

> punishment. Presently somebody began to talk to him. His spirits revived, and he became so absorbed in the entertainment… that he left the theatre with reluctance at one in the morning, after six hours' enjoyment, and got home an hour later to find his father and mother in a terrible state of anxiety.[447]

In another letter to his friend Charles Ford (1837-1910), written on 11 February 1857 and already six months into his acting career, Irving was still trying to persuade his domestic circle of the respectability of the stage:

> My dear Ford, By the same post I have sent you all the bits I possess defending the stage (which please preserve) and I can only add go and see – judge for yourself; if you then condemn it, I'll listen to you, but not before, - doing so without is passing sentence without proof, witness or trial – anti-English jurisprudence. My small experience tells me earnestly that it is an innocent, intellectual and moral recreation.[448]

These accounts suggest the strength of anti-theatrical sentiment in Irving's early social milieu. But they also demonstrate the personality of a young man who was able to be quite independent from the influence of his roots, someone who recognised the potential world beyond his social milieu. This individuality and presence of mind is perhaps one of the reasons for Irving's unusual achievements: he had developed the ability and confidence to take a step into the unknown. Irving's capacity to separate himself from his family and adolescent friends was hardly surprising given the circumstances of his upbringing and his experiences of being uprooted and removed from family and friends on several occasions.

By 1883 the climate of public opinion on the social position of actors and the value of theatre had shifted.[449] Brereton contributed to and harnessed this shift in his biography for Irving's benefit. By including these anecdotes he positioned Irving as a visionary young man, going against the flow of public opinion in order to 'rescue' the theatre for future generations. Brereton also positioned Irving well by suggesting the influence of Phelps and Sadler's Wells on his early interest in the theatre. With the

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[447] Ibid., 12.

[448] Henry Irving, 'To Charles Ford', 11 February 1857, Brereton Scrapbook, HTC.

[449] Foulkes, *Church and Stage*.

abolition of the patent monopoly in 1843, Phelps had turned Sadler's Wells into a respectable and thriving establishment known for its productions of Shakespeare and the good behaviour of its audiences. According to theatre historian Peter Thomson, Phelps believed in the educational value of Shakespeare's plays and in making them accessible to all classes.[450] By 1883 when Irving was the figurehead of the Victorian stage, Phelps' achievement had become part of the narrative of the growing respectability of the stage over the course of the nineteenth century. Irving's writings and speeches on Shakespeare and the theatre carried the same message. By stating that Sadler's Wells was 'the only theatre that attracted Irving' Brereton not only suggested a lineage from Samuel Phelps to Irving, but also that he had good judgement from an early age. In reality, Irving also gleefully visited other theatres such as the Adelphi in his teenage years.

The openness of the acting profession at entry level was certainly a factor in Irving's potential for success. There were no financial, social or skills-based barriers to becoming an actor, and it meant that Irving could make a relatively straightforward transition from his position as a commercial clerk. No educational level was required, there were no acting schools, and no upfront investment in formal training was needed. The only necessary outlay for new recruits was for costumes: in the mid-Victorian theatre actors were required to have their own outfits and props, but basic provision could be acquired without too much expense or borrowed from other actors. A formal introduction to a manager from an influential associate might smooth the path to an initial trial at a theatre, but this was not always necessary to make a start. Furthermore, as Michael Baker argues, the difference between the other arts and acting was that there was no degree of demonstrable skill needed to make a living from an acting career.[451] This was fortunate for Irving given that accounts of his talents were often less than flattering, as chapter five will show.

Despite its relative openness as an occupation, there were ways in which new recruits could be at an advantage in the market – and Irving had a good start. Since his school days under William Pinches, Irving had been interested in public recitations, and

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[450] Peter Thomson, *The Cambridge Introduction to English Theatre, 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 264–65.

[451] Baker, *The Rise*.

after he left school he developed an interest in amateur dramatics. Irving was involved in performances at Sussex Hall in Leadenhall Street, just a few streets away from his home, where he later attended the City Elocution Class.[452] Irving also told Mrs Wilkins that he had acted the part of Romeo in an amateur performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* at the Soho Theatre on 11 August 1856, just before he left London to embark on his career in theatre.[453] In undertaking this kind of amateur performance, which he paid for himself, Irving was following a practice popular amongst lower middle-class youths in London at this time.[454] These semi-public performances surely helped to fuel Irving's passion for the theatre, and prepared him somewhat for his first experience on the professional stage. Furthermore, since his school days Irving had been improving his diction and accent through elocution lessons, first under his schoolmaster William Pinches, then under Henry Thomas at the City Elocution Class, and then finally under the actor William Hoskins. Irving had also taken fencing and dancing lessons, two valuable and necessary skills for the stage.[455] All these preparations seem to suggest that Irving had been determined to become an actor from a young age. And indeed this is the story that Brereton and others told about Irving: his singular determination and hard work when all odds were stacked against him. Irving evidently did dream of becoming an actor, but the truth of his situation was more banal than this – Irving was fired from his position as a clerk at Thacker & Co for incompetence and laziness. In a letter to his former colleague, Charles Ford, written in Sunderland on 24 November 1856 Irving playfully reminisced on his previous life in London:

> Little did we think 6 months ago we should be so distant as we now are from one another or in such opposite occupations. In our happy gossip (to the annoyance of a certain Blackwell gent!) mysterious hints were thrown out of our intention to quit at some time the commercial life, but had not stamps been off and tempers on, it is probable we should have been together still; however, the fates willed otherwise and even circumstances aided to make me, what I long had wished to be, an actor.[456]

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[452] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 7.

[453] Irving, 'Wilkins 18 Aug 1856'.

[454] The practice is described in Mark Lemon, *Golden Fetters* (London, 1867).

[455] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 14.

[456] Henry Irving, 'To Charles Ford', 24 November 1856, Box 7, Folder 22, HLC.

Irving had not impressed his manager because he talked too much and achieved too little. By his own admittance Irving was lazy. In a later letter to Ford, Irving recounted the story of his incompetence in clerking skills when he was turned down for a position at an insurance office: 'I think I lost it by writing a word in the letter twice which I struck out. I was too lazy to re-write it. By the by I found a difficulty in composing a nice letter and got Jemmy who understood those things to do it for me.'[457] By neglecting his duties at Thacker & Co, Irving was sacked. This chance occurrence gave Irving the impetus he needed to embark on a new direction, and one that he might not have taken had he continued to work as a clerk at Thacker & Co. This failure did not quite fit the narrative of the successful and hardworking self-made man, and unsurprisingly never featured in any accounts of Irving's life.

It was not just his need to find new employment that gave Irving the impetus to try out a new career at this stage in his life. He had received a small inheritance at some point in his teenage years, although it is not clear from where this came. In his biography Irving's grandson suggested it came from an uncle, Thomas Brodribb, which again indicates the importance of family for providing financial assistance, and in particular the significance of avuncularism.[458] In a letter to Mrs Wilkins Irving told her that he had '70 to start with which has bought me many necessary parts of a wardrobe'.[459] And in a letter to Charles Ford, Irving asked him to take receipt of fifty cards with his new acting name, 'Irving', and to purchase for him an inkstand with a screw top.[460] This inheritance was therefore invaluable to Irving at this point in his life as it gave him sufficient money to buy costumes, props and other necessaries for his new career, to get him to his provincial destination by railway, and to provide a financial cushion should he fail. This financial advantage, not fitting neatly into the narrative of the self-made man, also did not feature in contemporary accounts of Irving's life. Another advantage Irving had over other new recruits was a letter of recommendation from the actor William Hoskins to the manager

[457] Henry Irving, 'To Charles Ford', 8 March 1858, Brereton Scrapbook, HTC.

[458] Laurence Irving, *Henry Irving: The Actor and His World* (London: Faber, 1951), 60; Eileen Cleere, *Avuncularism: Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

[459] Irving, 'Wilkins 18 Aug 1856'.

[460] Henry Irving, 'To Charles Ford', 3 September 1856, Brereton Scrapbook, HTC.

of the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Sunderland.[461] Before he emigrated to Australia Hoskins ensured Irving could get a foothold in the profession with this letter if he ever chose to become an actor. There must have been something about Irving that inspired older men to help him. The particular circumstances of Irving's life and his personality therefore meant that he was able to embark on what had been a dream. There were undoubtedly other men like Irving whose particular circumstances meant that they continued to dream but did not act.

Other aspects of the structure and working practices of the mid-Victorian theatre were important to Irving's social and professional rise. Although there was no formal training, there was an expectation that actors would spend some years training on the provincial stage. Many actors in the first half of the nineteenth century learnt their trade as part of itinerant troupes and minor companies that toured the provincial circuits, but another training route for entrants was via provincial theatre stock companies, and this was the route that Irving took. All major provincial theatres had permanently-based companies of actors who were able to play a large range of roles across the theatrical repertoire including farce, pantomime, comedy, tragedy and musical pieces. Typically a new entrant would start with a junior role and work his way up the hierarchy of the company. This experience was believed to provide actors with a comprehensive theatrical training and therefore time spent in the provinces was regarded as a necessary stage of an actor's career.[462] The ultimate goal for most aspiring actors was to get a position in a theatre company in London's West End where there was more chance of fame and fortune. But only a minority of actors ever made it to London, and plenty fell by the wayside because of the precarious nature of provincial employment and low wages. Stock company actors were paid weekly based on the amount of acting they had done, competition was fierce, and a regular weekly wage was not always guaranteed. One way in which provincial theatres attracted larger local audiences was to invite London 'stars' to head the bill for a run of performances. Stock companies therefore were often simply providing in-house support for visiting actors reaping the high financial rewards of provincial touring.[463] In autobiographies of nineteenth century actors there are many

[461] Irving, 'Wilkins 18 Aug 1856'.

[462] Rowell, *Victorian Theatre*; Jackson, *Victorian Theatre*.

[463] Baker, *The Rise*.

accounts of the help and guidance that star performers provided to those in their early careers in the provinces. Irving certainly received assistance from experienced actors, as I will demonstrate later. The point here to note is that Irving's time in provincial theatre was significant for his social mobility because it enabled him to work alongside and learn from men who were more polished than him.

The working practices of the mid-Victorian stage made this social mixing possible. Although there was a hierarchy of acting ranks, all actors would rehearse and act together for long periods on the stage. When actors were not required on stage during rehearsals and performances they congregated in the Green Room to wait for their stage calls. This was a convivial space where actors chatted to their colleagues, exchanged news and job opportunities.[464] In a letter to Ford written just two and a half months after he had started working at the Lyceum Theatre in Sunderland, Irving described the conviviality of this particular space: 'The Green Room is next to the stage and where they sit and gossip by a roaring fire during their wait at rehearsal or performance'.[465] The workspace of the theatre therefore provided the opportunity for building a professional network. The unusual hours actors were required to work also meant that they often socialised together in the clubs, pubs and chop-houses of the local area after performances. This professional and social networking created an atmosphere of equality amongst actors. Right from the start of his career Irving was immersed in this milieu, and described the working relationships he had experienced with other actors:

> There is no restraint on a laugh or a joke, no governor to stop your mouth, no petty subjection of one to another, because they are all equal – they work for a prize free to all. Macready, Phelps, Kean, were novices once and gained their position by degrees, however aided by genius or talent. A young aspirant, therefore, has, or ought to have, a special independence of feeling for no-one knows what he may become.[466]

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[464] For an account of the green room in the early Victorian period see George Vandenhoff, *Leaves From an Actor's Note-book, With Reminiscences and Chit-chat of the Green-room and the Stage, in England and America* (New York, 1860).

[465] Irving, 'Ford 24 Nov 1856'.

[466] Ibid.

The ideas circulating amongst his fellow actors must have informed Irving's growing confidence in his social and professional position. In this extract his words suggest that he regarded himself as a 'nobody' who might become a 'somebody'. How far this was bravado in the face of the opposition Irving faced from his family and friends at home as opposed to the belief he held in himself is hard to gauge; his words here were repeated almost verbatim in a letter to Mrs Wilkins three months later in February 1857.[467] Charles Ford and Mrs Wilkins would certainly have grasped the language of self-making that he was articulating. Irving was presenting his position, even as a junior in the profession, as one amongst equals; the implication was that talent rather than patronage was the route to success. This was not the reality of the profession, but it suggests how prevalent the fantasy of self-making was in mid-Victorian society.

Another aspect of the working practices of the theatre that helped Irving in his social and professional rise was the contractual and temporary nature of employment in the provinces, which forced actors to be geographically mobile. After just four months in Sunderland, Irving was offered a position in the stock company at the Theatre Royal Edinburgh, where he remained for over two and a half years. After a brief and disappointing attempt on the West End stage in the autumn of 1859 (more on this later), Irving returned to the provincial stage, acting in Dublin, Glasgow and Liverpool before finding a position in the stock company at the Theatre Royal Manchester in October 1860. There he remained for the next four and a half years, before being dismissed from the company in February 1865.[468] In the biography of his grandfather, Laurence Irving provided an account of the reason for Irving's dismissal. John Knowles (1810-1880), the manager of the Theatre Royal Manchester sacked Irving because he had refused to repeat the successful event he had organised at Manchester's Free Trade Hall a few days earlier. At this event Irving exposed the fraudulence of the Davenport Brothers, two Americans who had become a touring phenomenon by claiming to have paranormal powers. The exposure had elicited much press coverage, and Knowles, a canny

[467] Henry Irving, 'To Mary Ann Wilkins', 23 February 1857, Box 7, Folder 32, HLC.

[468] For details of Irving's early provincial career see Austin Brereton, *The Life of Henry Irving* (London: Longmans Green, 1908).

businessman, saw the financial potential in repeating the event. Irving, however, regarded himself as a serious actor and refused to perform it again.[469]

Irving's dismissal led to the biggest crisis in his career. For more than a year Irving was forced to travel constantly around the provinces, finding work where he could in short contracts before he finally received an offer of employment on the West End stage. During his childhood Irving had been geographically mobile, moving firstly from the quiet village of Keinton Mandeville to the city of Bristol, and thence to a remote region of Cornwall before heading to London. Given his own personal experience, therefore, he was perhaps more likely to be resilient to constant movement and change as an actor. Indeed, right from the start Irving commented on the lack of resilience that some actors had. In a letter to Ford he said he had met with 'a few poor blighted looking creatures who, sadly unfit for the stage, have abandoned some good business for it and find their error too late, - in fact the majority of them have mistaken their calling.'[470] Irving certainly had resilience in abundance, surviving a very hard twelve months from 1865 to 1866 when he was unemployed and impoverished for long stretches of time.

Relocating to the provinces, more importantly, meant a move away from Irving's lower middle-class family. He could distance himself from his childhood social milieu and develop a new and different identity and form of self-presentation in a way that would have been much harder had Irving remained connected on a daily basis to his family and domestic environment. Irving's movements around provincial cities in the ten years from 1856 to 1866 also meant he had the opportunity to gradually develop and adapt his self-presentation as he moved on to new environments and new people. When he arrived at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Sunderland as an eighteen year old, he started to observe his colleagues closely. Writing to Ford two months later he described his fellow actors: 'Speaking of them as a body, actors are intellectual, rollicking, good-natured, independent, knowing, eccentric, short-haired, today-care, class of beings.'[471] The traits Irving noticed perhaps give us a hint as to how he wished to be perceived himself. During

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[469] Laurence Irving, *Henry Irving: The Actor and His World* (London: Faber, 1951), 121–22. I have been unable to verify this account.

[470] Irving, 'Ford 24 Nov 1856'.

[471] Ibid.

his teenage years he had already started to develop an intellectual voice, and his move away from home and into a new career against the wishes of friends and family suggest a growing sense of independence. Irving liked the freedom that his chosen path had brought him and enjoyed the 'rollicking' behaviour of his new associates. It was not long before he started to relax and engage in this boisterous behaviour himself: many anecdotes from auto/biographies and newspaper interviews in the late nineteenth century recount stories of jokes and tricks that Irving had played on his fellow actors over the years. Furthermore, Irving began to take on the identity of an eccentric, which usefully served him in later years, as I shall demonstrate in chapter five.

The timing of Irving's entry into the acting profession in the 1850s was fortunate because it was just at a point in the nineteenth century when there was a lot of work available for actors. Evidence given before the 1832 House of Commons Select Committee on Dramatic Literature showed the effect of the monopoly by the London patent houses on the actor's prospects for work. It was reported that talented actors were apparently forced to remain in the provinces because there wasn't enough work for them at the three leading London theatres. With the lifting of those restrictions in 1843 with the Theatres Regulation Act, more opportunities became available in the capital. As a result of this legislation and the confident economic outlook, there was a boom in theatre building in London in the 1860s leading to more work opportunities in the West End. In 1866, the year that Irving secured a position on the West End stage, the House of Commons Select Committee on Theatrical Licences and Regulations heard testimony from witnesses that there was plenty of good work and opportunities for actors both in London and the provinces. Indeed, witnesses said, because of the boom in theatre building and the rise in audience numbers good actors were in short supply.[472] A generation later, in contrast, the acting profession was over-subscribed, and it became much harder for young entrants to secure a foothold on the stage.[473]

The timing of Irving's entry into the acting profession in the 1850s was also crucial for his chances of acting success as a man from a lower middle-class background. The

[472] See testimony provided by theatrical agent H.J. Turner to House of Commons Select Committee on Theatrical Licences and Regulations (May 1866) quoted in Jackson, *Victorian Theatre*, 116–17.

[473] Jerome K Jerome, *On the Stage, - and Off: The Brief Career of a Would-Be Actor* (London: The Leadenhall Press, 1891), 83–84.

social constituency at the top end of the profession changed during the second half of the nineteenth century as the proportion of entrants from non-theatrical backgrounds who became leading actors grew. More significantly, these recruits were not coming from lower middle-class backgrounds like Irving's, but rather from polite backgrounds. New actors who made it to the top of the profession were almost all from upper middle-class families. The sons of military men, lawyers, civil servants, engineers, men of letters, artists and the clergy started to enter the profession in larger numbers. And all of these men had received an education appropriate for gentlemen.[474] With the advantages of gentlemanly ease, wealth and social contacts, these men were more likely to succeed in the profession with the minimum of experience than lower middle-class recruits. Snapping at the heels of Irving and his generation of actors in the 1880s and 1890s were younger, more polished men such as Frank Benson (1858-1939), William Terriss (1847-1897), Johnston Forbes-Robertson (1853-1937) and Arthur Pinero (1855-1934). With younger, educated gentlemen around him Irving received repeated criticism in the late nineteenth century for his educational credentials, as chapter three demonstrated. In his public and private statements Irving trod a fine line between presenting himself as educated on the one hand, and as a self-made, self-educated man on the other. Irving could not hide his ignorance of Latin and French, for example, and he joked, almost as though it were a badge of pride for him as a self-made man, that he had no knowledge of either. Had Irving started out in his acting career a generation later, therefore, the odds would have been stacked even more tightly against him.

The structure and working practices of the theatre also significantly changed during the second half of the nineteenth century, and again the timing of Irving's entry into the profession in the 1850s was critical to his chances of success. Economic and technological developments in society were responsible for these changes. The growth of the railways in particular changed the practices of provincial theatre.[475] By the late nineteenth century whole theatre companies were touring the provinces by rail with everything they needed to mount a performance, including scenery, costumes and entourage. The traditional stock companies in their previous format therefore became increasingly unnecessary. This in turn changed the nature of the actor's theatrical

[474] Baker, *The Rise*, Appendix Tables 4-6.

[475] Thomson, *Cambridge Introduction*, Part 5.

training. Instead of a long stretch spent in the provinces, actors were likely to be taken on directly by theatre companies without any previous training. Amateur dramatic clubs in the late nineteenth century, particularly at universities, were frequently the new training grounds of the would-be actor, and gave an advantage to polite men.

The theatre bill and fashion for specific types of plays also changed in the 1860s, and had an impact not only on types of audiences in the West End, but also on the kinds of actors regarded as suitable for the roles. The new realistic 'cup-and-saucer' or 'drawing room' drama representing contemporary polite social situations, such as the plays by Tom Robertson, became popular. And with the advent of long-run productions the mixed nightly programme was replaced with a one-piece whose content increasingly attracted elite audiences. These cup-and-saucer plays were perfectly suited for the new upper middle-class recruits entering the profession. With increasingly specialised roles the need for a diverse training for those at the top end of the acting profession was less necessary. There were still many lower middle-class aspirants, but there was less opportunity for them to break into and move up the acting hierarchy.[476] The Victorian theatre therefore rapidly changed in the space of one generation. What was possible for Irving as a new recruit from a lower middle-class background in the mid-Victorian period was much harder for recruits of similar background in the late nineteenth century. The timing of Irving's experience, therefore, was integral to his success.

Friends, patrons, networks

Another crucial element of Irving's success was the nineteenth-century practice of 'friendship'. In the theatre world building an occupational network of friends was particularly important for professional success. Irving was helped in this regard by the culture of conviviality and sociability in the acting profession, both inside and outside the working spaces of the theatre. Although some acting jobs were advertised in theatrical industry newspapers such as *The Era*, word of mouth was an important mechanism for finding opportunities. Recruitment into acting positions was a relatively informal process, and positions were frequently gained through personal recommendation. Making friends

[476] Baker, *The Rise*.

and building a network of contacts was therefore necessary for survival in an industry where work was largely low paid and income varied week-by-week depending on how much work was available. Irving's ability to embrace this aspect of his professional life enabled him to find new jobs at different provincial theatres. Irving enjoyed socialising, particularly with other actors, and his contemporaries provide evidence of this. The actor Lionel Brough (1836-1909), for example, said of Irving that 'with a crony or cronies, he would talk till dawn, and after, on the Theatre and all thereunto appertaining: and when his club closed it was nothing for him to call a cab and take them home with him for further whisky, talk, and cigars'.[477] Another actor Seymour Hicks (1871-1949) recollected Irving's 'not unusual' habit of socialising with friends into the early hours of the morning.[478]

Contemporaries provide testament of Irving's personality and his ability to attract people, which were crucial attributes in a professional culture where skills of sociability were so important. His friend the theatre critic Clement Scott (1841-1904) remarked that 'the nature of Henry Irving has endeared him to some of the most celebrated men of his time, and made him a welcome guest in the best literary and art society'.[479] Fellow actor Squire Bancroft (1841-1926) remarked of Irving that 'he owned that mysterious power which draws towards its possessor the affection of his fellows; and he must, early in his life, have learnt the important truth, that to be well served, you must first teach yourself how to become beloved.'[480] Other contemporary voices are testament to the nature of his personality. After Irving's death the writer Max Beerbohm (1872-1956) said of him that 'Irving's presence dominated even those who could not be enchanted by it. His magnetism was intense, and unceasing'.[481] A revealing observation by Seymour Hicks suggests another key aspect of Irving's personality that was a strength – his ability to listen to and show interest in others: 'he knew that a smile at suppertime, gentle flattery, and the taking of interest in the other man's affairs was infallible and disarming.'[482] Irving

[477] H.M. Walbrook, 'Henry Irving', *Fortnightly*, February 1938.

[478] Edward Seymour Hicks, *Between Ourselves* (London: Cassell & Co, 1930), 125.

[479] *The Theatre* Jan 1, 1884, 39.

[480] Marie Bancroft and Squire Bancroft, *The Bancrofts: Recollections of Sixty Years* (London: John Murray, 1909), 351–52.

[481] Max Beerbohm, *Around Theatres*, vol. II. (London: William Heinemann, 1924), 177.

[482] Hicks, *Between Ourselves*, 123.

drew people in and won supporters by flattery and attention. Furthermore, he was fun loving, and joined in the tomfoolery that prevailed amongst his acting comrades.[483] He was also gentle and generous. As actor-manager of the Lyceum Theatre in London in the 1880s and 1890s Irving was renowned for his lavish hospitality, turning a disused backstage area into a dining room where he regularly hosted guests for 'chicken and champagne' at the end of the night during the London theatre season.[484] The supper for 350 guests on Lyceum stage on the 14 February 1880 to commemorate the one hundredth performance of *The Merchant of Venice* was just one of many large celebratory events that Irving hosted in the theatre.

But even before fame and riches came to Irving his generosity was clear to his friends. In later years Toole recalled of Irving:

> He always was careless about money, lavish in his hospitalities – give-you-all-he-had kind of hospitality – whether it was a banquet worthy of a prince, or in his early days a chop and a glass of ale. He has not altered one jot, except if it were possible to be a better fellow in his well-deserved prosperity.[485]

Irving's generous, self-effacing and attentive personality was integral to his success because it generated affection from those around him. People wanted to help him. Irving's first experience of the power of friends in the theatre demonstrated to him how important it was to foster professional relationships – his theatre engagement in Sunderland came via the introduction from actor William Hoskins. The impact of this early patron relationship was so significant that he never forgot it: years later when Hoskins died in Australia Irving donated £100 to the fund for his widow and child.[486] After his experience with Hoskins Irving quickly established a network of friends who helped him to further his career and provided professional, financial and emotional support. His network of industry friends came to include a wide variety of people involved in the

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[483] For examples see Joseph Hatton, *Reminiscences of J. L. Toole* (London: Hurst and Blackett Ltd, 1889), 57–58; Clement Scott, *The Drama of Yesterday and Today*, vol. II (London: Macmillan and Co, 1899), 41–44.

[484] Extensive details of Irving's hospitality at the Lyceum Theatre are given in Bram Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (London: William Heinemann, 1906).

[485] Hatton, *Reminiscences*, 98.

[486] 'Theatrical Gossip' *The Era* , Saturday, April 30, 1887; Issue 2536.

theatre world, including actors, managers, backstage workers, journalists and playwrights.

During Irving's early career he drew on his growing network on many occasions. Always looking for an opportunity to get on to the London stage, for example, Irving made sure to become acquainted with the star actor Edward Sothern (1826-1881) in 1863 whilst the latter was on a provincial tour in Manchester. When he got back to London Sothern wrote to his friend Dr Andrews (dates unknown) in Manchester, indicating that he wanted to help Irving:

> Dr Andrews – if your friend who played Charles with me in 'Aunt's Advice' (I forget his name?) wishes to get a good opening in London, let him write to Mr Bateman – Adelphi Theatre – I've spoken very highly of him and I think it's all right if he can honourably leave his present engagement. The part is a 1st class juvenile part. Remember I do this out of pure good feeling and do not wish my name to be used in the business either directly or indirectly. OK, I've just remembered the name – Irving is it not? Well, remark [?] this to him and if he sees his way clear let him send Bateman a line.[487]

Hezekiah Bateman (1812-1875) was an American actor and theatre manager who had come to London to promote the acting career of his daughters.[488] This letter demonstrates the operation of networks in the Victorian theatre. Sothern could hardly remember Irving's name, and yet he regarded it as worth his while to connect Irving with his friend Bateman. It also demonstrates the power of recommendation, because Bateman and Irving were in contact shortly afterwards.[489] Nothing came of this introduction at this stage, but the connection had been made, and in 1871 Bateman provided Irving with his breakthrough opportunity as leading actor at the Lyceum Theatre.

Although Irving was starting to extend his own network of friends in the theatre world, two actors in particular, J.L. Toole and Charles J. Mathews, helped him

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[487] Edward Sothern, 'To Dr. Andrews', May 1863, 37/1/5, THM.

[488] Gayle T. Harris, 'Bateman, Hezekiah Linthicum (1812–1875)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, n.d.), online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1666, accessed 15 June 2017].

[489] Hezekiah Bateman, 'To Henry Irving', 12 January 1864, 37/1/5, THM; Hezekiah Bateman, 'To Henry Irving', 20 January 1864, 37/1/5, THM; Hezekiah Bateman, 'To Henry Irving', 11 March 1864, 37/1/5, THM.

considerably. These men were effectively his professional patrons. Patronage was an aspect of the Victorian culture of 'friendship', and it was crucial to Irving's success. The historian J.M. Bourne describes patronage as the relationship between two individuals of unequal status, wealth and influence in which reciprocity and intimacy were fundamental features.[490] For the client the relationship could result in financial, professional and social benefits; for the patron, the reward was kudos or increased self-esteem. The practice stemmed from the tradition of paternalism, in which individuals would seek out more wealthy or influential 'friends' in their network of kin and contacts to help them with advice, professional and social introductions, financial support and recommendations for preferment. Bourne argues that most people seeking patronage in the nineteenth century were gentlemen who needed financial security from salaried positions in order to maintain their social status. His study focuses on patronage in the distribution of official positions in the Court, central and local government, the Church of England, the armed services, and commercial concerns such as the East India Company. But patronage was prevalent in other areas of professional and social life outside of the distribution of these official salaried positions and sinecures, including in the theatre world. The acting profession was not the network of equals that Irving had articulated so confidently to his friends and family, and it is very unlikely that Irving would have become so successful without the assistance of J.L. Toole and Charles J. Mathews. These two men 'pulled strings' for him with industry contacts, championed him, guided and advised him, and provided resources, support and opportunities when they were able.

Relationships between older and younger men were frequent in the bohemian world of the mid-Victorian period. Edward Clarke (1841-1931), who had attended the City Commercial shortly after Irving, points to a literary patron who had a huge impact on the direction of his professional and social life in his early manhood. Henry Morley (1822-1894) became Clarke's patron when he began to attend literature evening classes at King's College. Clarke described their friendship as 'so delightful a privilege that I have been thankful all my life for having been brought under his influence'.[491] Others testify to similar relationships. The editor of *Punch* Mark Lemon (1841-1870), for example, remarked that the writer Douglas Jerrold (1803-1857) 'was always kind to young men

[490] J. M Bourne, *Patronage and Society in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986).

[491] Edward Clarke, *The Story of My Life* (London: John Murray, 1918), 53.

especially and gave them a helping hand'.[492] In a pen-portrait of the artist Frederic Leighton (1830-1896) one journalist wrote, 'The writer has in his mind now two young painters who owe their success in life not a little to the ungrudging admiration expressed for their work by one whose sole aim apparently is to raise the craft to the level of its ancient glory'.[493] The role that patrons played in the early stages of the careers of younger artists is starting to be explored. Literary historian Joanne Shattock, for example, has demonstrated the important part that the author Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) played in embedding two Scottish writers into the London literary network in their early careers in the 1840s.[494]

This patronage was an aspect of the culture of male intimacy and homo-social bonding in the nineteenth century.[495] Historian Alan Bray has argued that emotionally and physically close but platonic male friendship survived as a cultural practice from the Middle Ages through into the nineteenth century.[496] In its Victorian context male friendship took on particular significance with the growing interest in Hellenism and the idea that the older male guided and trained his younger ward. The ideal of noble, elevating and pure platonic love between men easily merged with contemporary notions about manly or 'muscular' Christianity, with the healthy development of body and mind and with the maintenance of social stability and progress.[497] Biblical characters such as Jonathan and David were invoked to attest the superiority of male friendship over all others. Victorian texts such as Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) or Craik's *John Halifax,*

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[492] Quoted in Leary, *Punch Brotherhood*, 31.

[493] Edmund Hodgson Yates, ed., 'Frederic Leighton R.A. at Kensington', in *Celebrities at Home*, 2nd series (London: Office of 'The World', 1878), 103.

[494] Joanne Shattock, 'Professional Networking, Masculine and Feminine', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 44, no. 2 (16 July 2011): 128–40.

[495] My focus here is on the client-patron relationship between men, but patronage also operated between men and women, and between women. See Carolyn Oulton, *Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[496] Alan Bray, *The Friend* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[497] For examples in mid-Victorian literature see Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1858); Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown at Oxford* (Cambridge, 1861); Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (London: Edward Moxon, 1850). On the development of classical thought in the nineteenth century see Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980); Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in 19th-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Jeffrey Richards, '"Passing the Love of Women": Manly Love and Victorian Society', in *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940*, ed. J. A Mangan and James Walvin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 92–122.

Gentleman (1856), which express devotion between men, can appear to be homoerotic if they are read from current perspectives on sexuality. But viewed in the context of the Victorian culture of male intimacy, florid expressions of devotion and intimacy between men did not necessarily demonstrate sexual intimacy. I have interpreted the relationships between Irving and his patrons with this in mind, as I have found no evidence of sexual relations between them.

Irving benefited greatly from this culture of male intimacy, but the timing of his relationships with his patrons was again crucial. The system of patronage was increasingly challenged through the second half of the nineteenth century, as the inefficiency and incompetence that it frequently produced was highlighted.[498] Furthermore, the possibility of close male intimacy had started to decline by the late nineteenth century, especially after Oscar Wilde invoked the ideal of Greek love in his defence at his trial for gross indecency in 1895.[499] Although patronage still existed in late Victorian society, what had been the norm in the mid-Victorian period was increasingly being questioned by the end of the nineteenth century. Works such as Edward Carpenter's *Iolaus: An Anthology of Friendship* (1902) concertedly attempted to render male intimacy respectable again by drawing on these prior cultural ideas of male friendship at a time when they had come under suspicion. But the fact that this was necessary suggested a shift in meanings around male relationships. The relationships that Irving was able to have in the 1860s, therefore, were not necessarily possible for young men in the next generation.

J.L. Toole was Irving's first patron in the provinces, and just like Irving he came from a lower middle-class background.[500] They met in Edinburgh in the summer of 1857, when Irving was nineteen and Toole was twenty-seven. Irving had moved from the Lyceum Theatre in Glasgow to the Theatre Royal Edinburgh in early 1857, where Toole

[498] For example, the public outrage following the Crimean War 1854-6 in which administrative incompetence played a large part. On the political discourses of reform in areas of public administration see Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement* (London: Longmans, Green, 1959), chapter 8.

[499] Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914*, 39 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

[500] Michael Read has pointed to their close relationship and the assistance Toole gave Irving: Michael Read, 'The Chief and His Companion: Irving and J.L. Toole', in *Henry Irving: A Re-Evaluation of the Pre-Eminent Victorian Actor-Manager*, ed. Richard Foulkes (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 11–25.

had acted occasionally since July 1853. Eight years Irving's senior, Toole had begun his professional acting career at the age of twenty-two at the Queen's Theatre Dublin in 1852. Toole had made an immediate success on stage, and was quickly poached by the manager of the Theatre Royal in Edinburgh, Robert Wyndham (1814-1894). By the time that Irving met him in Edinburgh, Toole had already started his London campaign (at the St James's Theatre in October 1854), and was well on his way to becoming a star. Toole was popular with Edinburgh audiences, and made an extended visit there in the summer of 1857, before returning to London in the autumn. In his memoirs Toole recollected that their friendship did not begin until many years later when Irving was acting in Manchester.[501] However, evidence suggests that they started to develop a friendship from at least the summer of 1858, when Toole revisited Edinburgh to act. It appears that they stayed in the same theatrical lodgings at 17 Union Place and attended the same church nearby on Sundays.[502] Toole was seminal in helping Irving with his career from early on. He had a wide network of contacts in the theatre world despite having just four years more experience of professional acting. Contemporary accounts of Toole suggest he had a genial and fun-loving personality, which certainly would have helped him build his own network. But Toole's family also aided him significantly in this; despite coming from a non-theatrical background he was already embedded in the bohemian network of London through the contacts of his father and brother.

Toole was fundamental to Irving's professional rise and social mobility. The two men had many things in common, which made friendship between them more likely. Toole had a similar upbringing in London to Irving, and this shared background was undoubtedly one of the reasons the men were so strongly connected. A close study of Toole's upbringing demonstrates the value of examining micro-level details in order to suggest explanations for particular historical occurrences – in this case why Irving and Toole became good friends. Toole was born in St Mary Axe in the City of London, and lived in Devonshire Street until at least the time of his father's death in 1847. Toole's home was situated just two streets from Old Broad Street where Irving lived with his parents. He was the youngest son of James Frederick Toole (1796-1847), a porter for the East India Company; James's employment papers indicate that before he joined the

[501] Hatton, *Reminiscences*.

[502] Read, 'Chief and His Champion'.

company in 1824 as a labourer, he was a mason.[503] James was an amiable and kind-hearted man with a booming voice, and by 1830 he was utilising this natural attribute by working as a toastmaster and master of ceremonies. His characteristic vocal style and jovial temperament quickly earned him a reputation in this line, and his services were constantly in demand in London and across the country at official and charitable dinners. In an article in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1900 the publisher George M. Smith (1824-1901) recalled James Toole in the 1840s as a 'gorgeous being' and 'a magnificent fellow'.[504]

James Toole became the foremost toastmaster in the City, with a talent that made him a household name and a byword for a characterful voice. He featured in countless newspaper and journal accounts of celebratory dinners, and he was always described in glowing terms. Recording the proceedings of the annual dinner of the Cripplegate Charitable Fund and Dispensary, for example, the journalist for the *Daily News* reported that, 'The usual loyal and patriotic toasts [were] dispensed of by announcement from the immortal Toole, the toastmaster general of the city of London'.[505] In 1843 he was the subject of a poem in *Punch* entitled 'An Ode to Toast-master Toole', and he was mentioned in George Augustus Sala's 1859 work *Twice Round the Clock* as the 'toast-master of arts and buttered toast'.[506] An obituary in *The Pictorial Times* in 1847 summarised James Toole's career: 'He always officiated to the Duke of Cambridge, by desire of his Royal Highness, with whom he was an especial favourite. As a toastmaster, his equal will never be found.'[507] From a working-class background James Toole rose during his own lifetime into the lower middle class. Though he was not a gentleman, he was constantly in the presence of gentlemen, including royalty. His talent as a toastmaster meant he was sought after by and had access to influential men, including leading figures in the literary and arts world of London. In April 1846, for example, a comment appeared in the journal *The Satirist* suggesting that the stewards of the Royal General Theatrical Fund, whose chairman was Charles Dickens, were 'most

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[503] 'James Toole' 20 Oct 1824 IOR/L/AG/30/5 Lists of labourers appointed to the warehouses 1801-1832.

[504] George M. Smith, 'In the Early Forties', *Cornhill Magazine* IX (November 1900).

[505] *Daily News*, Wednesday, March 11, 1846; Issue 43.

[506] 'An Ode to Toast-Master Toole', *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 11 November 1843, 208; G.A. Sala, *Twice Round the Clock; or, The Hours of the Day and Night in London* (London: Houlston and Wright, 1859).

[507] 'The Death of Mr Toole' *The Pictorial Times*, February 1847.

anxious to obtain the services of Toole, the toastmaster' at their annual dinner'.[508] His fame and renown as a toastmaster significantly aided his two sons, Francis and John.

Like Irving, J.L. Toole was primed for a commercial career, and received a similar education to other lower middle-class boys in London at this time. He was educated at the newly founded City of London School, established by Act of Parliament and opened in 1837 in premises in Milk Street, Cheapside. Although this was an endowed public school, boys from all denominations were accepted as scholars and the rate was much cheaper than other public schools (at mid-century eight pounds and five shillings).[509] The focus was on providing an all-round general education, with practical elements. In 1835 *The Morning Chronicle* detailed the general instruction to be provided to all boys:

> To read well, with due modulation and appropriate emphasis; English Grammar and Composition; Latin Language; French Language; Writing, Arithmetic, and Book keeping; Elements of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy; Geography and Natural History; Ancient and Modern History; Elements of Choral Singing; Lectures on Chemistry and other branches of Experimental Philosophy.[510]

The emphasis on teaching boys to pronounce properly, as well as writing, arithmetic and book-keeping, made this school an attractive prospect for lower middle-class parents intent on getting their sons started in a commercial career. Furthermore, many of the teachers were university-educated gentlemen, which meant that boys were exposed daily to the bearing and accent of polite men. The headmaster, the Rev. Dr. Mortimer (1805-1871) was a gentleman and scholar, educated at Oxford, and under his steer (from 1840-1865) the City of London School thrived.[511] Toole had the advantage of a longer education than Irving, attending the school from 1841-45, aged eleven to fifteen, before he joined a wine merchant's company as a clerk.

It is not known whether J.L. Toole had a vulgar accent as a result of his family background, but like Irving he joined an elocution class, the City Histrionic Club, after he

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[508] *The Satirist; or, the Censor of the Times*, Sunday, April 12, 1846; Issue 730: 118.

[509] 'City of London School History' [http://www.clsb.org.uk/history accessed 5 March 2016].

[510] *The Morning Chronicle*, Friday, May 8, 1835; Issue 20458.

[511] J.H. Lupton and M.C. Curthoys, 'Mortimer, George Ferris Whidborne (1805–1871)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19346, accessed 5 March 2016].

left school. The members gave free regular public performances, in mechanics institutes and halls, for which they paid the hire costs. Dramatic readings in such institutions were part of the rational recreation movement popular with the lower middle classes; the idea was to elevate and educate by engaging with Shakespeare and other literary classics without being exposed to the immoral atmosphere of the theatre. In his memoirs Toole drew attention to his engagement with this activity in his youth, just as Irving had done: 'When Irving was a lad he recited at Crosby Hall, London, and I used to recite at Sussex Hall; I often wish we had known each other then.'[512] Like Irving, Toole was also fascinated by the theatre from a young age, and attended Sadler's Wells Theatre, the City of London Theatre and other theatres in the East End as a teenager. Toole had trodden the same adolescent 'stomping ground' as Irving, and had the same experience of sneaking into theatres without parental permission. Like Irving he had seen and admired great actors such as Samuel Phelps. By the time they met, Toole had extensive experience of working with some of these great actors, including Phelps himself and Charles J. Mathews.

Like Irving, the particular circumstances of Toole's early life contributed to his subsequent success. He owed his professional entry into Victorian theatre to his elder brother Francis Frederick Toole (1819-1889). Francis inherited his father's talents and followed closely in his footsteps. Like his father, Francis became a porter for the East India Company before being promoted to a clerk, and like his father he also worked as a toastmaster and master of ceremonies in the evenings.[513] When James Toole died in 1847 Francis had the responsibility for his three younger sisters and brother, all of whom were in early adulthood but were living with their father at the time of his death.[514] Francis's position as a toastmaster continued the family's connection with influential men, and for this reason he was able to secure an audience of notable men at Toole's amateur stage appearance at the Walworth Institute on 23 February 1852. In attendance were Charles Dickens, the actor and theatre manager Benjamin Webster (1798-1882), the journalist and playwright E.L. Blanchard (1820-1889), and various other newspaper

[512] Hatton, *Reminiscences*, 97.

[513] Michael Read, 'Toole, John Lawrence (1830–1906)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36536, accessed 5 March 2016]; TNA 1841 ESW Census HO107/725/15/13/19.

[514] 'The Death of Mr Toole' *The Pictorial Times*, February 1847.

theatre critics.[515] Toole received rave reviews for this performance, and Dickens himself commended Toole's talents to his brother Francis. For the next fifteen years Francis acted as Toole's theatrical agent, thus ensuring through his own network that his brother received notice from influential men in the theatrical world.

Despite being well connected, however, J.L. Toole's social background was the subject of gossip in later years, just as it was for Irving. Following the death of Francis Toole, a notice appeared in a gossip column in the journal *The County Gentleman*, which pointed to J.L. Toole's toastmaster heritage, and indicates the snobbery that he was occasionally subjected to:

> The death of Mr Toastmaster Toole reminds me of a little anecdote which I once heard, but which was likely enough to have been altogether apocryphal. Mr Toole was once a guest at a 'little dinner', and during dessert his host had the bad taste to call upon him for a toast. He responded by raising his glass, and, without tasting its contents, remarking with quiet emphasis 'To our next meeting'. Immediately afterwards he left the table and the house.[516]

The host had offended Toole by calling on him to assume the humble position of toastmaster. Whether this event did actually happen is not important: it demonstrates that Toole also received barbed comments about his social origins, just like Irving.

The common social ground between himself and Irving must have been part of J.L. Toole's motivation to help the younger actor. The same could not be said about his other patron, Charles J. Mathews, as they shared no common social ground. The son of the celebrated actor Charles Mathews (1776-1835), Charles J. Mathews moved in polite circles from the start of his life. The elder Mathews, the son of a Methodist preacher and bookseller in Richmond, was so taken by the literature of the theatre which he read in his father's shop, that he tried a career on the stage. By 1803, the year of his son's birth, Charles Mathews had made his London debut, and by the 1820s he had reached the

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[515] Read, 'Toole, John Lawrence (1830–1906)'. On Toole's early acting career see Michael Read, 'John Lawrence Toole: A Biographical Study of His Amateur Acting Experience and Early Theatrical Career, 1850-3' (London, Bedford College, 1984).

[516] *The County Gentleman: Sporting Gazette, Agricultural Journal*, Saturday, September 7, 1889; Issue 1426: 1214.

zenith of his professional success with his 'At Home' entertainments. Charles Mathews performed these annually, commissioning talented writers to produce amusing monologues and farces in which his skill as a mimic and ventriloquist could be shown to their full effect. These performances were highly anticipated by audiences, and they won him fame and fortune. By 1828 he was the highest-ever paid comic actor.[517] Charles J. Mathews benefited from his father's professional and social success; he was exposed from an early age to some of the most celebrated figures in London society. In his memoirs Charles J. Mathews recalled the stream of guests who came to his parents' home in Fulham when he was a child, amongst whom included the writers Theodore Hook (1788-1841) and Horace Smith (1779-1849), and the actor Charles Kemble (1775-1854). When Charles J. Mathews was in his teens the family moved to Highgate, where these guests were 'reinforced by such illustrious additions as Coleridge the poet, who was our neighbour and daily visitor, Sir Walter Scott – the great Sir Walter – Lord Byron, Lord Alvanley, Moore, Campbell, Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt, and a host of artists, authors, actors and beaux esprits, whose conversation dazzled and whose intelligence elevated'.[518] In a similar way to Irving two generations later, Charles Mathews senior had risen from the lower middle class to become a gentleman. The Mathews family was therefore in a much higher social circle than the families of both Toole and Irving; Charles J. Mathews had been socialised in polite society from birth.

Charles J. Mathews received a very different kind of education to Irving. It was the education of a gentleman, and his schooling started early. Mathews went to a private preparatory school where he boarded from the age of six, before transferring at the age of eleven to the public school that his father had attended, Merchant Taylors' School, in the City of London.[519] Through the influence of his father's friend Sir John Silvester, Mathews was placed on a foundation there, and lived as a boarder with the headmaster the Rev. Mr Cherry. He remained there for some years, where lessons consisted largely of Latin, Greek and Hebrew. But Mathews was unhappy at Merchant Taylors', and eventually his father transferred him to the well-known private school of the

[517] Richard L. Klepac, 'Mathews, Charles (1776–1835)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18329, accessed 14 March 2016].

[518] Charles Dickens, ed., *The Life of Charles James Mathews: Chiefly Autobiographical with Selections from His Correspondence and Speeches* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1879), 43–44.

[519] Dickens, *Life of Charles James Mathews*.

lexicographer Dr Charles Richardson (1775-1865) in Clapham. Here, under the kind watch of his new schoolmaster, and in the company of other eminent actors' sons, Charles J. Mathews thrived.[520] At Richardson's school he developed his knowledge and appreciation of classics, and studied a range of subjects including mathematics. Although his father had destined Charles J. Mathews for Oxford University and then a career in the Church, an interest in drawing and architecture led him initially to the profession of architecture. Through his father's connections the sixteen-year old Mathews was articled for four years to the eminent architectural draughtsman, Augustus Pugin (1768?–1832). Throughout his early years and into early manhood Charles J. Mathews had benefited from the power of his father's network, which had provided him with privileges that Irving did not have.

It was not just in his education that Mathews' early experiences differed from Irving's. The senior Mathews supported his son financially until his death in 1835, and for most of this time Charles J. Mathews led a life of leisure. When his formal training finished, Charles J. Mathews was engaged by another of his father's friends, Charles John Gardiner, second Viscount Mountjoy and first earl of Blessington (1782–1829) to design a castle on his Irish estate. Although nothing was built, Mathews became companion to Lord Blessington and travelled with him to Naples where they joined his wife, the celebrated society hostess and author, Marguerite Gardiner, Countess of Blessington (1789-1849). In Italy Mathews, now in his early twenties, lived for a year amongst eminent literary and society figures including the poet Lord Byron (1788-1824) and the artist and dandy Count D'Orsay (1801-1852). The difference in parental connections between Irving's father and Mathews' father was stark: whereas Samuel Brodribb could only secure a post for Irving as the errand boy in the office below where they lived, Mathews senior was introducing his son into the highest social circles. On his return to England Mathews undertook architectural work in Wales before joining the office of John Nash (1752-1835), one of the leading architects of the day, another friend of his father's. But Mathews' architectural work was not a success, and so, still supported financially by his father, he embarked on a three-year tour of Italy. On his return Charles J. Mathews

[520] E.C. Marchant and John D. Haigh, 'Richardson, Charles (1775–1865)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23546, accessed 15 March 2016].

peppered more leisurely pursuits in the company of aristocratic and fashionable society with lacklustre attempts to earn a living as a district surveyor and a playwright.

Charles J. Mathews' life of leisure ended when his father died, at which point he went on to the stage. Mathews had long been interested in the theatre as he wrote stage material for his father and had participated in amateur performances since at least his late teens. It is possible that Mathews had waited to start his professional career on the stage until after his father had died. Mathews soon joined the company of the celebrated actress Madame Vestris (1797-1856) at the Olympic Theatre, as an actor and writer. This was the start of a renowned partnership. Vestris had successfully remodelled the Olympic, and together with Mathews she developed a 'realistic' style of society comedy that attracted fashionable audiences including Queen Victoria.[521] In his memoirs the actor George Vandenhoff (1820-1885) referred to the partnership of Vestris and Mathews as the 'drawing room management', emphasizing the respectability of their theatre and the gentility of their conduct towards their staff.[522] Vestris and Mathews were married in 1838. For nearly twenty years their huge successes were pitted with financial struggles, failed managements and bankruptcy, eventually leading to Mathews' imprisonment for debt shortly before his wife's death in the summer of 1856. The point at which Irving first went on to the stage was the turning point in Mathews' acting career. Over the next few years he discharged his debts, married an American actress, disavowed management and began to prosper as one of the leading – and much loved – comic actors of his generation.

It is likely that Mathews and Irving first met in Edinburgh at some point between 1857 and 1859 when the older actor was touring the provinces. This is probably when the two men started to become friends, or possibly during one of several visits that Mathews made to theatres where Irving was acting in subsequent years: he starred in Glasgow with Irving in 1860 and again later that year at the Theatre Royal Manchester for a season. It is probable that Toole facilitated their friendship because Toole and Mathews

[521] J.S. Bratton, 'Vestris , Lucia Elizabeth (1797–1856)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18331, accessed 15 March 2016].

[522] Vandenhoff, *Green-room*.

were good friends who had acted together on many occasions in Edinburgh.[523] At any rate a letter from Mathews to Irving indicates that they were certainly friends by 1864.[524]

Both of Irving's patrons were instrumental in helping him to build his professional network. The journalist and playwright John Hollingshead (1827-1904) recalled being introduced to Irving by Toole on a trip to Edinburgh in March 1859.[525] Hollingshead's reputation was at that point rising fast, having recently scored a hit with his farce *The Birthplace of Podgers*, in which Toole was the star attraction. Hollingshead was also writing for Dickens's *Household Words*, and was dramatic critic for the *Daily News* and *London Review* at that time. As Toole was a very popular actor Hollingshead benefited financially and in reputation as a playwright from working with him, so it was in Hollinghead's interest to take notice of Toole's friends. In September that same year Toole was instrumental in securing Irving his London debut in the play *The Ivy Hall* at the Princess's Theatre.[526] Hollingshead recalled seeing this performance; it is likely that he attended because of Toole. Irving's London debut was not a success, and he left the Princess's shortly afterwards, unhappy with the small parts he was playing. But Toole continued his support by encouraging Irving to present a dramatic reading at Crosby Hall in Bishopsgate on 19 December 1859, bringing an entourage of friends and journalists to see him perform. The large number of press reviews of the performance, including the main dramatic paper *The Era*, as well as leading dailies *The Standard* and *The Daily Telegraph* are testament to the work that Toole did on Irving's behalf: an unknown young actor giving a solo performance would not have attracted leading critics such as Edmund Yates (1831-1894) and E.L. Blanchard (1820-1889) without recommendation. Indeed the critic of *The Era* was amazed to find it so well attended, especially given Irving's recitation choice, *The Lady of Lyons*:

> Considering how hacknied [sic] the title and the plot have become, it is a matter of surprise that an audience could have been found hardy enough to brave the

[523] Hatton, *Reminiscences*, 92.

[524] Charles J. Mathews, 'To Henry Irving', 17 November 1864, 37/1/5, THM.

[525] John Hollingshead, *My Lifetime* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co, 1895).

[526] Hatton, *Reminiscences*, 97.

> inclemency of a December evening to hear the unadorned words of this now stale play.[527]

The attraction for the audience on that evening, I would suggest, was not Irving but rather his patron: they had attended at the behest of Toole, who wanted them to review his friend's performance in order to raise his profile.

Irving used his growing friendship with Toole to his advantage whenever he could. After leaving the Princess's Theatre, Irving was out of work for several months, but he picked up a three-week contract at the Queen's Theatre in Dublin where Toole had made his provincial debut. Toole had been very popular with audiences there, and it is very likely that he once again pulled in his contacts on Irving's behalf to secure work for him. In a letter to Toole in March 1860 Irving mentioned dining with several of Toole's associates, and openly acknowledged that he used Toole's name strategically in company: 'When I am introduced to any stranger – I immediately mention your name – 'tis as good nay better than the weather for it leads to more – Toole is a household word.'[528] Irving's relationship with Toole was already by this stage affectionate: he signed off the letter 'Goodbye and God bless, your Henry Irving.'

Charles J. Mathews was also instrumental in helping Irving to build his professional network. Irving was always on the look out for another chance to take London, and on 17 November 1864 Mathews wrote from London to Irving in Manchester to say that he had put in a good word for him with the new manager of the St James's Theatre, Louisa Herbert (1831-1921).[529] Mathews was Herbert's stage manager, and he hinted to Irving that he could make him very comfortable there. Under Mathews' suggestion, Herbert would write to Irving about an engagement at Christmas. It was possible that Irving was unable to disengage himself from his contract at Manchester, because nothing came of this opportunity. Undeterred, Mathews continued to keep Irving's name in circulation amongst his London connections, and in the autumn of 1866

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[527] *The Era*, Sunday 25 December 1859, Issue 1109.

[528] Henry Irving, 'To J.L. Toole', March 1860, 37/1/4, THM.

[529] Mathews, 'Irving 17 Nov. 1864'.

another chance came. Herbert offered Irving an engagement at the St James's Theatre; it is likely that Mathews once again facilitated this.

Mathews and Toole, both experienced and successful actors, were professional role models for Irving in the early part of his career. Historian Michael Read suggests that Toole was the actor Irving longed to be. He argues that Irving closely observed Toole's easy and confident style in front of audiences, and modeled his parting speech to Edinburgh audiences in 1859 on one that Toole had previously made.[530] Irving also had the opportunity to learn from Mathews when he performed his most famous parts, many of which Irving himself had to perform. In Edinburgh in 1858, for example, Irving was cast as 'Dazzle' in Dion Boucicault's play *London Assurance*, the character Mathews had played when it was first produced at Covent Garden in 1841 under the Mathews-Vestris management. Irving was steeped in the Charles J. Mathews style of acting: his elocution teacher Henry Thomas was a fan of Mathews, and Irving had played similar parts in the dramatic productions that they had put on at the City Elocution Class.[531] Now Irving could learn from the master himself. Irving recalled several occasions when Mathews provided other professional support and encouragement to him. Acting with a 'star' couple in Birmingham in 1865, Irving had delighted the audience with a 'little bit of business' by dropping an orange from his coat pocket onto the stage, but was severely reprimanded by the couple later. When Irving was acting in the same play with Mathews in Liverpool a year later, he tried it out on the first night but decided against repeating it again for fear of offending Mathews. Coming to Irving's dressing room after the show, Mathews' response demonstrated his warm feeling towards his friend: '"Well, young Irving, what's the matter with you tonight?" he said; "you're as dull as ditchwater. Where's the orange? Let's have that orange, it's the hit of the piece"'.[532] Mathews had recognized that Irving lacked confidence, and provided the mentoring and encouragement that he needed.

Mathews provided this kind of support on several other occasions. When Irving arrived at the St James's Theatre in London in 1866, for example, Mathews again showed

[530] Read, 'Chief and His Champion'.

[531] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 9.

[532] *Strand Magazine*, July, 1892; Issue 4: 290.

his concern for his young friend, helping him to settle in. Irving recalled that Mathews was a 'true friend to me':

> I remember when I first went to the St. James's Theatre; I went as stage manager, and there were a lot of old actors there – amongst them Frank Matthews and Walter Lacy. I was a young man amongst these old stagers. I admit to feeling nervous, and was fearful lest I might do something which the older men might resent. The first day came. All went very nicely, and we were just commencing to rehearse *The Belle's Stratagem* when who should skip on to the stage but Charles Mathews! Stopping the rehearsal for the moment, he rushed up to Frank Matthews and Walter Lacy. 'Ah! Frank, my boy – Walter! One moment. My young friend, Irving – Frank, Walter. Be kind to him. Good-bye. God bless you!' And he was gone.[533]

Frank Matthews (1807-1871) and Walter Lacy (1809-1898) were long-standing friends of Charles J. Mathews; they had acted together over the years at the Olympic, the Lyceum and other theatres.[534] By recounting this story Irving demonstrated to Victorian readers that those at the very top of the profession – gentlemen actors – had valued him since his early days on the stage, once again underscoring his reputation. As a result of this introduction Frank Matthews in particular befriended Irving, and became a key figure in his life until he died in 1871. Mathews' act of entrenching Irving amongst men who would protect him was one of the many kindnesses he showed to the young actor. With this level of support from such a popular patron, Irving was much more likely to succeed. Furthermore, late Victorian readers of *Strand Magazine*, in which this story appeared in 1892, would have recognised the depiction of bonhomie in Charles J. Mathews' behaviour here. Bonhomie was a term borrowed from the French 'bonhomme' (good-natured man), and first emerged in English in the late eighteenth century. Bonhomie was a valued masculine trait in polite circles. Authors of nineteenth-century advice literature praised those who had bonhomie and suggested it came naturally to gentlemen. It was a mark of gentility and part of the repertoire of politeness; bonhomie was a skill that demonstrated ease and the ability to make others feel welcome.

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[533] *Strand Magazine*, July, 1892; Issue 4: 283.

[534] Joseph Knight and Katherine Cockin, 'Lacy, Walter (1809–1898)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn, Oct 2007 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15865, accessed 18 March 2016].

Mathews was also concerned to keep Irving's spirit and self-confidence high. Irving recalled another occasion in his career when Mathews had encouraged him:

> I once played a part in London, and was very much cut up by the Press. Mathews was round at my rooms almost as soon as the papers were out. He talked to me for over an hour, cheered me up, and did more for me in that hour than I can tell. I heard afterwards that as soon as he read the notices in the papers at his breakfast, he got up there and then, left his meal unfinished, and hurried away.[535]

This kind of support and intimacy from the older man is suggestive of the type of paternal relationship that patrons provided to younger men in the nineteenth century. It is possible that Charles J. Mathews thought of Irving as the son he never had. Certainly the warmth of feeling they shared was significant. Irving described Mathews as one of his dearest friends, and described him as having had a 'tender heart'.[536]

It is likely that Irving's career would have failed without the support of these two influential patrons. Both Mathews and Toole sustained him and worked hard on his behalf behind the scenes. When Irving finally made it to the West End stage in 1866 he was still not self-sufficient, and relied heavily on help from his patrons to keep his career from floundering. Although his London career had started well at the St James's Theatre where he initially received good reviews, by the following autumn his profile was diminishing, his salary was low and he found himself being cast in minor parts. At this point it is probable that Toole, whose career in contrast to Irving's was flourishing day by day, stepped in to support his younger friend by securing him a place in the company at the newly built Queen's Theatre on Long Acre in the West End. Toole was the star attraction there, commanding a significantly larger salary than the rest of the company. By facilitating this move, Toole positioned Irving in the limelight alongside him. But at the end of his engagement at the Queen's Theatre in spring 1869, Irving again found himself out of work with few prospects. Toole supported him by inviting him on a lucrative summer tour of the provinces, refusing to book engagements at which Irving was not also engaged with him. Toole's loyalty to his young friend was noted by their contemporaries, including theatre critic Clement Scott, who commented in his memoirs that 'Johnny Toole

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[535] *Strand Magazine*, July, 1892; Issue 4: 283.

[536] Ibid.

proved the best friend that man [Irving] could have. He knew Irving's merits – none better. He had acted with him for years, and he was sincerely attached to him'.[537] This concern for Irving's professional success continued in the autumn of 1869, when Toole was about to join the company of another recently built theatre, the Gaiety, with a new play which H.J. Byron (1835-1884) had written especially for him, *Uncle Dick's Darling*. Irving was in a minor role at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane at that time, and Toole stepped in again to rescue him: he secured Irving's place in the Gaiety company, insisting that the manager John Hollingshead engage him.[538] Once more Toole placed Irving by his side in the limelight, and positioned him in the company of one of the most exciting and talked-about theatres of the day. Toole was determined to keep Irving in the public eye and give him the opportunity for maximum exposure not only amongst industry professionals, but also fashionable London audiences. With Toole leading the cast, the Gaiety was a 'hot' ticket: Edward, Prince of Wales (1841-1910) was in the audience on the opening night of the new season.

Conclusion

This chapter has started to demonstrate some ways in which the particular experiences of Irving's childhood and adolescent years prepared him to enter the social and cultural milieu of the Victorian theatre. Acting was not an easy route to wealth and status; it required high levels of resilience and the ability to adapt rapidly to new places and people, and I suggest that Irving's life experiences had contributed to these crucial attributes of his personality. Irving's geographical upheavals from rural to urban, the different communities he had encountered, the men who had influenced and helped him, the different cultural ideas he had used to construct his identity in his youth, and his particular financial circumstances, uniquely provided him with the foundations that enabled him to move into the theatre. Irving was able to conceive of a different life beyond his own social and cultural milieu. Further, the timing of Irving's move into the theatre was also a significant factor for his later success: the changing structures and practices of Victorian theatre during the second half of the nineteenth century made it

[537] Scott, *The Drama*, II:39; Stoker, *Reminiscences*, 178.

[538] Scott, *The Drama*, II:39; Hollingshead, *My Lifetime*, 22.

harder for the next generation of lower middle-class entrants to break into acting. What was possible for this particular Victorian to do was specific to his own life and circumstances. I have used the short biographies of Charles J. Mathews and J.L. Toole to underscore the argument that it was the particularities of individuals' circumstances and experiences that provided the foundations for what they were later able to achieve.

One of the claims of this thesis is the importance of patronage and social networks in the process of social mobility and for accessing privilege. This chapter has demonstrated how crucial Irving's two main patrons were to the eventual success of his acting career: they provided him with professional contacts, new jobs and emotional support. Without these men to support Irving his career might have floundered on several occasions. It certainly helped Irving that he was an amiable friend to these men, but to what extent he learnt to behave in this way and to what extent he was innately companionable we cannot know. What we do know is that Irving had experience in his youth of cultivating friends who were useful to him – his schoolmaster, preacher and elocution teacher – and this experience served him well in his new life.

Finally, once again we see a different story about the realities of Irving's life and how he was able to achieve what he did. Irving was far from the independent self-made man as presented in the 1883 biography: no mention is made of the crucial support he received from these patrons. This omission once again signals how Irving made use of the language of self-making in order to legitimise his position as a respectable and worthy public figurehead. In the final chapter I provide evidence of perhaps the most important support his two patrons gave him: they embedded him into their polite social circles, which eventually enabled Irving to learn the bodily movements and behaviour of a gentleman. Without being able to pass as a gentleman, Irving would not have reached the pinnacle of the Victorian stage.

Chapter Five:
Irving the Bohemian Gentleman

In the conclusion to this thesis I will make some brief observations about the biographical case study as a methodology. This chapter, however, will serve as an overall conclusion by drawing together the themes that have run through this study. I have argued that the Victorians interpreted status through the individual's bodily practices and behaviour during social interaction. Chapter one provided evidence of the ideas circulating in Victorian society about status and the body by analysing behavioural advice literature. This chapter shows that this was not just precept – it happened in practice too. Using autobiographies I will demonstrate that Irving's contemporaries interpreted his status through his comportment and speech during their social interactions with him. The language his contemporaries used to describe Irving's bodily practices and behaviour suggested that they classified him as vulgar in the earlier years of his career before he became a gentleman.

I have also argued that upward social mobility between the vulgar and the polite for individuals was dependent on a long process of acculturation in polite society, until the constructed comportment and speech of gentility appeared 'natural'. This chapter will provide evidence that Irving went through this process of acculturation, and the examples I give will demonstrate the learning experiences he had. Chapter four indicated the ways in which Irving's patrons assisted him in ensuring his professional success. The first part of this chapter argues that this professional success went hand in hand with a change in Irving's bodily practices and behaviour, and demonstrates how patronage was crucial for enabling the process of acculturation to occur. Irving's patrons actively brought him into their social circles and through these men Irving expanded his personal network – and with that his social and professional opportunities.

During this study I have considered the effects of different cultural contexts on the individual's experience, sense of self and identity, and the ways in which they might have conditioned his bodily practices and behaviour. In previous chapters I have

suggested how Irving's experiences in different contexts during his childhood and youth were crucial for enabling his social movement to happen at all. This chapter explores further how Irving constructed his identity in the context of the bohemian world of Victorian theatre, and why he was able to construct himself in such a way based on his past experiences.

One of the claims I make is that a close look at the experiences of one individual can provide fresh perspectives on cultures of class in the Victorian period. In particular the idea of authentic and fraudulent identity has emerged as a narrative concern in polite culture. In previous chapters I have shown that some of Irving's polite contemporaries publicly questioned his authenticity as a gentleman by commenting on his social background and education, and by doing so policed the boundaries of their group. Even whilst Irving's contemporaries acknowledged him as a gentleman in later life, at the same time there was always a question over his status. This sort of prejudice was the perennial problem of the parvenu: for the 'authentic' gentleman by birth, this type of policing was less likely to happen. One of Irving's responses to the criticisms he received, I have argued, was to construct a particular story about his life through the medium of biography. The evidence presented in the second part of this chapter demonstrates that the questioning of Irving's status did not necessarily come from direct criticism of his social background or education. As a known newcomer, Irving was held accountable to ideals of polite culture more stridently than 'authentic' gentlemen. In Irving's case he had not been able to match up to polite masculine ideals as the breadwinner of an upper-middle class family, and this had potentially damaging consequences for his reputation and standing in society. I will argue that Irving styled himself as an eccentric genius and an authentic bohemian to counter potential attacks about his finances and marriage breakdown, providing another line of defence for his status as a gentleman.

Learning to be a gentleman

It was not until his thirties that Irving had learnt to appear as a gentleman. Many nineteenth-century autobiographies mention Irving, but few discuss what he was like in the years before he became a well-known actor. Those few texts that do discuss him in

these earlier years share similarities: without directly using the word 'vulgar' they describe his behaviour in similar terms to those used by the writers of behavioural advice literature to describe vulgar behaviour. These accounts also contrast Irving's earlier behaviour with his behaviour after he had become professionally successful, demonstrating the change that Irving underwent during his adult life.

The autobiographical accounts used in this section slip between the standard master narrative of Irving's life and their own memories of him. The authors were writing their memoirs either towards the end of Irving's life or after his death, and were negotiating all the myths and stories that had been established about Irving by that stage. They repeatedly underscore the narrative of Irving as a self-made man destined from the outset to greatness. At the same time they also contradict this, sometimes overtly, other times subtly, with accounts of Irving's behaviour before he became successful. Irving's awkwardness and lack of 'gentlemanly polish' were evident to his contemporaries, and he had not always been the commanding and confident man that he became at the height of his career. In one sense these accounts were contributing to the 'distance travelled' narrative of 'Irving the Self-Made Man' by highlighting the difference in his behaviour in the earlier years. Irving's 'official' biography of 1883 was a classic account of self-making, presenting an edited and romanticised version of his life story, and therefore the appearance of this narrative in other accounts of him would be familiar to readers. But the autobiographical sources in this chapter also take the edge off that romantic image somewhat, presenting him as a bashful man well into his adult years. They therefore nuance and trouble the grand narrative of Irving's life because they offer another view of him; they reveal an interesting tension between the master narrative of Irving and their own memories.[539] For these authors this negotiation leads to an inconsistent account of Irving, but they are striking for their difference from other accounts, and are more credible because of it.

As with Irving's 1883 biography I have read these other memoirs with caution however, mindful of the fictions that the authors themselves might have wished to construct about their own lives. These accounts are interesting because they position

[539] Andrea Hajek and Joseph Maslen, 'Autobiographies of a Generation? Carolyn Steedman, Luisa Passerini and the Memory of 1968', *Memory Studies* 6, no. 1 (1 January 2013): 23–36.

Irving socially at the point when the authors first encountered him, but they also work to position the authors socially at that point too: the very fact that they classified Irving as vulgar communicated to the reader that they regarded themselves as polite. But as I will show, there was some ambiguity over the social status of some of these individuals, which might help to explain why these life-long friends of Irving would choose to represent him in such a way. By indicating to the reader that they could recognise Irving's difference, they were distancing themselves from vulgar behaviour and bolstering their own status. Furthermore, these representations of Irving were recounted many years after their initial meeting, and therefore their sense of him would certainly have been affected by their experience and memories of him in the intervening years: Irving as a polite man was what they had known of him for the last thirty years of his life. Nevertheless, these authors pointedly chose to mention Irving's behaviour in the earlier years in a particular manner, and this said something about their sense of their own social positions, and perhaps, their anxieties.

A notable aspect of some of these accounts is the way that class is written onto Irving's body. Representations of the male body in Victorian texts connected physical appearance with class distinctions through physiognomic devices. In an 1854 article in the journal *Athenaeum*, the author suggested that as people 'improved' their social positions, so came a corresponding 'improvement' in the way their faces looked: 'we believe that in the present day a better type of physiognomy is beginning to appear:- the face grows more oval, the forehead higher and fuller, the lips smaller and firmer, the nose nobler and straighter.'[540] The language used in these accounts reinforces Irving's transformation from vulgar to polite. With the change in Irving's behaviour, his body likewise changed: he embodied the gentleman in his physical features and became a 'natural' gentleman. These sources therefore contributed to Victorian narratives about the natural differences between men from different social classes. But they also evidence once again how these authors were slipping in and out of the story of Irving's self-making, mixing memory with the pull of the master narrative.

[540] 'The historical portrait gallery at the Sydenham Palace' *Athenaeum*, 1389 (1854), 718, cited in Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 44.

These accounts of the contrast in Irving's behaviour in the earlier and later part of his career are supported by newspaper reports of his acting at this time. During the later part of his career when he was actor-manager of the Lyceum Theatre, Irving eschewed the lighter, contemporary melodramas and comedies of his earlier career in favour of historical plays, Shakespeare and more serious, 'highbrow' roles. He was rarely required to act the Victorian gentleman on stage in later years. But for the first twenty years of his career he was regularly seen performing in roles requiring him to act as a polite man, and from critics' reviews he was not always successful. This offers another insight into how Irving's contemporaries perceived him in these years, and provide evidence of his on-going struggle to 'pass' as a gentleman.

The theatre critic and civil servant Clement Scott (1841-1904), who met Irving in November 1866, described his first impressions of the actor in his autobiography. They had been introduced through Fred Charles (dates unknown), an actor who was playing with Irving at that time at the St James's Theatre on King Street. Charles had brought Irving to meet Scott at his place of work, the War Office on Pall Mall, just a minute's walk from the theatre. Scott recalled Irving's 'shy, nervous manner': he was clearly not at ease.[541] Shyness was a sign of vulgarity, as one behavioural advice writer put it: 'Except in very young people shyness is not only ungraceful, but a positive injury and disadvantage. If we blush, stammer or fidget in the presence of strangers, they will assuredly form a low estimate of our breeding, and fail to do justice to our powers of mind, our education and our solid worth'.[542] Nervousness or bashfulness was a marker of social status, or of 'not being early introduced into good company,' as the authors of the *Guide to English Etiquette* described it. For them, 'nothing perhaps is more pitiable, or more obviously a stumbling-block in the way of success' than nervousness.[543] Irving certainly did not have the excuse, on the cusp of turning thirty, of being 'very young'. Indeed Scott, three years Irving's junior, prefaced the description of his first meeting with Irving with a story about the room in which they had first met: Scott had moved there from the front part of the building overlooking the street to this quieter, less distracting side of the building; in the

[541] Clement Scott, *The Drama of Yesterday and Today*, vol. II (London: Macmillan and Co, 1899), 2.

[542] *Mixing in Society. A Complete Manual of Manners. By the Right Hon. the Countess of *******.* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1870), 244.

[543] *Guide to English Etiquette, with the Rules of Polite Society for Ladies and Gentlemen. By an English Lady and Gentleman.* (London, 1844), 12.

bloom of his youth he had enjoyed being positioned on the busier side, but by that stage he had settled into the responsibilities of his life and was glad for the change of his office location. Irving's nervousness was all the more noteworthy therefore in contrast to what it should have been by that time of his life.

Published in 1899, before Irving's death, Scott's autobiography should be interpreted with all the caveats of a text whose author was writing about a lifelong friend who was likely to read it. The two men had a close professional and social relationship throughout their careers. Irving was one of the few in the acting profession to stand by Scott after he made critical remarks about the immorality of female actors in an interview for *Great Thoughts* in 1897, for which he was forced to resign as theatre critic for *The Daily Telegraph*. There is certainly a strong element of reverence in Scott's writing, which follows the master narrative of Irving as the 'great man' destined to become head of the stage. In the preface to his memoirs, Scott underscored this view of Irving's achievements in Victorian theatre: 'It was only the strong leader, the student of the new school, the diplomatic reformer, the man of tact, and taste, and influence, and popularity, who was wanted. That man was discovered in Henry Irving, who was at once elected unanimously to the vacant throne.'[544] Throughout his autobiography, Scott describes Irving in the language of self-making, couching his ascent as a struggle involving hard work, determination and patience. By noting Irving's manner on their first meeting, Scott was emphasising to the reader through a description of his behaviour the distance that Irving had travelled. What it also signifies, however, is a subtle comment, one that Victorian readers would have understood, on Irving's social origins: he was not born into gentility.

Scott was also signalling to the reader his own social position with this comment on Irving's behaviour – that he in contrast *was* a 'born gentleman' and was able to recognise those who were not. Scott had come from a polite background: he was the son of a clergyman, and was educated privately at Marlborough College before entering the War Office. His father's occupation and his own privileged education as well as his civil service occupation, which required influential friends to secure, indicate that Scott was already part of the privileged elite when they met. Despite their social differences and Irving's awkwardness, the two men became friends. The structures and practices of the

[544] Clement Scott, *The Drama of Yesterday and Today*, vol. I (London: Macmillan and Co, 1899), ix.

Victorian theatre, discussed in chapter four, allowed for this unconventional social mixing, and both men had good reason to nurture a relationship. Although he was a civil servant, Scott was at that time attempting to make his reputation in theatre criticism. He had written for *The Sunday Times*, *Fun* and *London Figaro*, and was an enthusiastic theatregoer. He had already written reviews for two plays at the St James's Theatre in which Irving had acted, and was keen to build relationships with actors for his professional development. Irving was an unknown young actor of similar age to Scott, and he believed that Irving had potential. For Irving the benefit of a friendship with Scott was obvious: any good relationship with a theatre critic was a bonus for his career.

But Scott's comment also signifies something of the complexities of his own professional status: for many years questions had been raised about Scott's independence as a journalist. From 1880-1889 Scott had been the editor of *The Theatre*, a journal that had been founded by Irving and from whom he purchased it for a nominal amount; essentially Irving had used it as a vehicle for self-promotion, and under Scott's editorship it was rarely critical of the actor. Furthermore, on occasion in Scott's career he had been involved in legal altercations over accusations of venality. In 1882 Scott sued Henry Sampson of *The Referee* for libel, and won. When the actor Richard Mansfield accused him in 1889 of taking managerial bribes, Irving stepped in to quell the furore. Scott's association with Irving had been at times questionable, and his representation of Irving in those early days could be read as a means of asserting his own independence and status. Despite Irving's gentility in later years Scott here subtly, and in passing, asserted his own advantage over Irving: his social origins.

Similarly, the actor-manager Squire Bancroft (1841-1926) remembered his first meeting with Irving. In the later part of the nineteenth century, as senior figures of the stage, Irving and Bancroft together publicly lobbied for the respectability of the acting profession, and they appeared to have been on friendly terms since they met. Bancroft wrote two autobiographies, the first published during Irving's life in 1888, the second after Irving's death, in 1909. This latter autobiography carries much of the same material as the first, but there are additions, including additional comments on Irving. In this later autobiography Bancroft describes the moment he met Irving in early 1867. As he was walking with a mutual friend through the Burlington Arcade, which was located just three

minutes walk from the St James's Theatre where Irving was acting, they bumped into him. Bancroft remembered Irving in a less than flattering light:

> Truth to tell, in the early part of his career he had but little, if any, [refinement]. In those distant days there was indeed a smack of the country actor in this appearance; and, if it is not profanity to utter the thought, even a suggestion of a type immortalised by Dickens.[545]

Bancroft here was almost certainly referring to the character 'Alfred Jingle' in Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* (1837). As one of Dickens's most distinctive characters Jingle was well known in Victorian society as a down-at-heel actor who pretends to be a gentleman. In *The Dickens Dictionary* first published in 1872, Jingle is described as 'an impudent strolling actor, who palms himself off… as a gentleman of consequence, sponges good dinners and borrows money'.[546] The passage in which Dickens introduced Jingle in *The Pickwick Papers* gives some indication of the 'appearance' that Bancroft had in mind for Irving:

> He was about the middle height, but the thinness of his body, and the length of his legs, gave him the appearance of being much taller. The green coat had been a smart dress garment in the days of swallow-tails, but had evidently in those times adorned a much shorter man than the stranger, for the soiled and faded sleeves scarcely reached to his wrists. It was buttoned closely up to his chin, at the imminent hazard of splitting the back; and an old stock, without a vestige of shirt collar, ornamented his neck. His scanty black trousers displayed here and there those shiny patches which bespeak long service, and were strapped tightly over a pair of patched and mended shoes, as if to conceal the dirty white stockings, which were nevertheless distinctly visible. His long black hair escaped in negligent waves from beneath each side of his old pinched up hat; and glimpses of his bare wrist might be observed, between the tops of his gloves, and the cuffs of his coat sleeves. His face was thin and haggard; but an indescribable air of jaunty impudence and perfect self-possession pervaded the whole man.[547]

Although Jingle had self-possession, it was accompanied with 'jaunty impudence' and other signs that he was not a gentleman. Dickens signals this to the reader not only in this

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[545] Marie Bancroft and Squire Bancroft, *The Bancrofts: Recollections of Sixty Years* (London: John Murray, 1909), 352.

[546] Gilbert A. Pierce, ed., *The Dickens Dictionary* (Boston, 1872), 29.

[547] Charles Dickens, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (London: Penguin, 1999), 24–25.

long description of Jingle's clothing, but also in the way that Jingle speaks: he is loquacious, and speaks in broken sentences, often without verbs. Bancroft's implication in this comparison to Jingle was clear: Irving came across as provincial rather than smart and urbane, he looked shabby, and appeared as though he was pretending to be a gentleman. He was 'acting' the part, and Bancroft detected this. For those who could recognise a gentleman, Irving stood out. Bancroft had policed the authenticity of Irving's status as a gentleman at this point in 1867, and had found it wanting.

For Victorian readers familiar with Irving's legendary tall, thin body and long legs and his once-black wavy hair, this was a believable description. After he became successful Irving was caricatured repeatedly in the press for these physical features and his haphazard 'bohemian' appearance, as I will demonstrate later in the chapter. By then, however, he was a wealthy man and his tailoring was commensurate with his income. Irving was certainly short of money during the 1860s, and it is entirely plausible that his clothing was rather threadbare. Furthermore, Irving himself had played the part of Jingle – and Jingle-like characters – in his career several times. The critical reception of these performances suggests that he suited these parts far better than those in which he had to play the 'real' gentleman. Bancroft's description comparing Irving to Jingle with 'an indescribable air of jaunty impudence and perfect self-possession' certainly contradicts the 'shy, nervous manner' that Scott remembers. But this inconsistency is not surprising: this was a period during which Irving was consciously learning the bodily practices and behaviour of a gentleman, and evidently was not always confident in his performance of it.

This description of Irving was certainly damning, and would explain why Bancroft included it in his later autobiography published after Irving had died. But just as in Scott's account, the 'great man' narrative about Irving is also present in Bancroft's memoirs, mixing the master version of the story of Irving with his own memories. Bancroft described Irving in his late career in a very different manner:

> Certainly, in his later years, he would have graced, in manner and aspect, any position to which he might have been called. The refinement of his appearance

> grew to be remarkable – the Church or the Bench, equally with literature or science, might with pride in that regard have claimed him as a chief.[548]

In this description Bancroft couched Irving in the language of politeness, describing his appearance and manner as having 'refinement', a term that came up frequently in advice literature to describe gentlemen. He reinforced this impression by comparing Irving's appearance to leading figureheads in the old professions, implicitly suggesting that Irving later presented as a polite, educated gentleman. But with this compliment also came an implied criticism: Bancroft claimed Irving's refined manner and appearance 'only came to him towards the autumn of his life'. Just as Scott had done, Bancroft was here indicating Irving's lack of refinement as a mature adult, reinforcing the self-making narrative and the suggestion that Irving was not used to mixing in polite circles even by his late twenties. Bancroft also suggested that Irving's physical features changed as his social position changed: the refinement of Irving's appearance increasingly grew as he became more socially accepted. Bancroft therefore writes Irving's social change on to his body, reinforcing Victorian narratives of the natural differences between social classes.

But just as Scott's comments on Irving had indicated something about himself, so too did Bancroft's: his comments signal anxieties about his own ambiguous social origins. Bancroft's family background was rather obscure. He was the son of an oil merchant who died when he was just five years old, which put the family's finances under strain. In his autobiography Bancroft claimed he received a private education in England and France, but lack of family money makes this doubtful. Bancroft married Marie Wilton (1839-1921), the daughter of a provincial actor, who became one of the most successful actresses of her generation. If Bancroft came from 'high' social origins he certainly married 'down' with her. Whatever his own upbringing, by the time Bancroft encountered Irving for the first time he had a confident manner and far more polish than Irving despite there being just three years difference in their ages. Bancroft was moving in polite circles at that time; he was principal actor and soon to become manager of the Prince of Wales Theatre on Coventry Street, which was amongst the most fashionable theatres in London and known for attracting polite audiences to its drawing-room dramas. As a career-long advocate of the respectability of the acting profession Bancroft

[548] Ibid.

signposted his status throughout his autobiography. But given his interest in promoting acting as a profession suitable for gentlemen, it is perhaps surprising that he chose to depict Irving as a vulgar man. This description of Irving in 1867 positioned Bancroft above him and it is possible that Bancroft was using Irving as a foil to elevate his own status. Irving was the acknowledged leader of the acting profession, he was more popular than Bancroft, more celebrated, and was the first actor to be knighted. This description of Irving in the earlier part of his career was a way for Bancroft to finally assert an advantage over him.

Bancroft was not the only friend of Irving's who remarked so pointedly on the change in his behaviour over time. Ellen Terry (1847-1928), Irving's leading lady for twenty four years, had first met Irving when they acted together for a short time at the Queen's Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue in late 1867. Terry and Irving grew close over the years, both professionally and in their private lives. Their mutual affection is evident from letters between them, from the involvement that Irving had with Terry's two children, and from Terry's account of their relationship. Indeed the exact nature of their relationship was the subject of gossip and speculation in the late nineteenth century (more on this later). In her memoirs, published in 1908 after his death, Terry described the huge contrast as she perceived it between the gauche Irving of 1867 and the polished Irving of the late 1870s when, as newly appointed actor-manager of the Lyceum Theatre he visited her at her home. He invited Terry to be his leading lady:

> Not a word of our conversation about the engagement can I remember. I did notice the great change that had taken place in the man since I had last met him in 1867. Then he was really almost ordinary looking – with a moustache, an unwrinkled face, and a sloping forehead. The only wonderful thing about him was his melancholy. When I was playing the piano once in the greenroom at the Queen's Theatre, he came in and listened. I remember being aware of his presence by his sigh – the deepest, profoundest, sincerest sigh I ever heard from any human being... The incident impressed itself on my mind, inseparably associated with a picture of him as he looked at thirty – a picture by no means pleasing. He looked conceited, and almost savagely proud of the isolation in which he lived. There was a touch of exaggeration in his appearance – a dash of Werther, with a few flourishes of Jingle! Nervously sensitive to ridicule, self-conscious, suffering deeply through his inability to express himself through his art, Henry Irving, in 1867, was a very different person from the Henry Irving who

> called on me in Longridge Road in 1878. In ten years he had found himself, and so lost himself – lost, I mean, much of that stiff, ugly, self-consciousness which had encased him as the shell encases the lobster. His forehead had become more massive, and the very outline of his features had altered. He was a man of the world, whose strenuous fighting now was to be done as a general – not, as hitherto, in the ranks. His manner was very quiet and gentle.[549]

In this description a familiar picture of Irving at the age of thirty as a vulgar man emerges. Indeed Terry pointedly mentioned his age, the implications of which many contemporary readers would have grasped. Whilst Terry did not use the term 'vulgar', she used terms to describe Irving that indicated his vulgarity: Irving was 'nervously sensitive to ridicule, self-conscious', and appeared 'conceited' and 'savagely proud in the isolation in which he lived'. All of these aspects of his behaviour were indications of vulgar behaviour according to advice writers in the nineteenth century. Irving's 'self-consciousness', a word Terry repeated twice in this passage, was according to one author

> a most painful feeling; for the sufferer is aware of his folly, though by no effort of reason can he restrain it within bounds. In the first instance he becomes sensitively apprehensive that he is quizzed and laughed at; makes awkward attempts to look easy and dégagé; assumes an air of desperation, while trembling inwardly; and becomes, finally, simply ridiculous.[550]

Self-possession was a noticeable difference between the polite and vulgar, and Terry observed that Irving did not have it at this stage. Irving's later behaviour is also couched in terms of politeness: he was 'a man of the world' and 'quiet and gentle'. Terry repeated this impression of Irving's politeness in later life throughout her autobiography. Describing a speech Irving gave on the occasion of the hundredth performance of *The Merchant of Venice* on 14 Feb 1880, for example, she said of Irving that '[h]e spoke with good sense, good humour and good breeding'.[551] And in 1883, on arriving in America for their first tour, she recounted how Irving handled the journalists waiting for them when they got off the ship, with 'a manner full of refinement, bonhomie, elegance and geniality. "Have a cigar – have a cigar." That was the first remark of Henry's, which put

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[549] Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1908), 94.

[550] *Guide to English Etiquette*, 12.

[551] Terry, *Story*, 122.

everyone at ease.'[552] Like the accounts of Irving from Bancroft and Scott, Terry also presented a stark contrast in his manner between his early and later career. Irving learnt this bonhomie, I will suggest, from close observation of his patrons J.L. Toole and Charles J. Mathews over the years.

Like Bancroft, Terry also implied that Irving's physical features changed as his social position changed: the 'refinement' of Irving's appearance had grown with his move to gentility. When Irving was part of the vulgar majority his appearance had been 'ordinary', and his forehead had been 'sloping'; but once he had become a gentleman Irving's forehead had become 'more massive, and the very outline of his features had altered'. For readers who were familiar with physiognomic ideas popular at the time, the forehead was a key indicator of intellect and character, features that were often associated with social position. The author of *A Guide to the General Outlines of Physiognomy* claimed 'the retreating forehead is not desirable… This is an indication of a want of intellect'.[553] In contrast a 'wide, high forehead always is indicative of intelligence'.[554] Whilst opinion on the exact meaning of the shapes of foreheads differed in physiognomic guides, the 'correct' reading was irrelevant here. Terry's strongly contrasting picture of Irving guided the reader: men with sloping foreheads in her view left a lot to be desired, whilst men with massive foreheads were distinguished. And in her impression that Irving's self-consciousness made his body physically stiff and awkward, which she vividly evoked with a comparison to the hard shell of a lobster, Terry was again embodying class into him. This stiffness disappeared, was 'lost', when he became a gentleman. With this bodily change came authority, she suggested: he moved from being a rank and file soldier to being a leader of men. Like Bancroft, Terry was fixing his social position by naturalising it into his body, reinforcing Victorian narratives of the natural differences between social classes. Furthermore, for Terry there was a clear hierarchy between vulgarity and politeness: Irving's vulgar manner was 'by no means pleasing', he was 'ugly', and her description was full of negative connotations.

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[552] Ibid., 163.

[553] Henry Frith, *How to Read Character in Features, Forms and Faces. A Guide to the General Outlines of Physiognomy* (London: Ward, Lock & Co, 1891), 72.

[554] Ibid., 81.

Terry's description, like Bancroft's, is both damning of Irving and full of praise. She mixed the grand narrative of Irving as a great man with her own personal observations of him, and this sometimes led to a rather confused picture of him as both polite and vulgar. Terry's observations of Irving can also be interpreted in the light of her own ambiguous social position throughout her life and the fine line she trod in maintaining that. She herself had made the transition to gentility through her own networks and immersion in polite culture during the course of her young adulthood. Terry's own social origins were lower middle-class: she was born into a provincial acting family, and was working on the stage by the age of nine. By the mid-1870s Terry was one of London's leading actresses, a position that she held for the following twenty-five years. She undoubtedly became polite, but although she moved in polite circles there was always a question mark over her status as a lady.

Since at least the seventeenth century women had improved their social status and influence by becoming successful actresses; at the same time they could never quite avoid the association with prostitution or immorality that came with that occupation.[555] Furthermore, Terry's private life had been unconventional: at the age of sixteen she had married the artist G.F. Watts (1817-1904), who was more than thirty years her senior. In less than a year the marriage fell apart, and she was compelled to return to her parents and to the stage. In 1868, when she was twenty one, and still married, she moved out of London to live with the architect E.W. Godwin (1833-1886) and bore two children before this relationship also broke down in 1874. After finally receiving a divorce from Watts, she married the actor Charles Wardell (1839-1885) in 1877; this marriage lasted three years before the couple separated. Terry had not been born into gentility and as a recognised interloper into polite society she precariously maintained her position by bolstering her own status despite her scandalous private life. This perhaps suggests the exceptional leeway given to theatre performers moving in polite society in the Victorian period, a subject I will return to later.

Terry's depiction of Irving was one way to reinforce her own social credentials to readers, not only in this passage but also in other references to him throughout the

[555] Gillian Perry, *The First Actresses : Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011); Kerry Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

narrative of her life. She positioned herself as a benevolent teacher to Irving in matters of which a gentleman would be expected to have some knowledge. She 'blushed' for Irving for what she perceived as his ignorance about art, for example:

> I brought help, too, in pictorial matters. Henry Irving had had little training in such matters – I had had a great deal. Judgement about colour, clothes, lighting must be trained. I had learned from Mr. Watts, from Mr. Godwin, and from other artists, until a sense of decorative effect had become second nature to me.[556]

Implicit in this statement was Irving's lack of the cultural capital that came from a particular social background and education. Terry already had it, and that distinguished her from him. In this sense she used Irving as a foil to reinforce her own credibility and polite status. But it also highlights her education through Watts and then Godwin: the mode of her education was different from other women born into polite society. Watts in particular was at the heart of the little Holland House circle, the centre of bohemian gentility in the mid-Victorian years, and she learnt much during the year 1864 when she lived in this milieu as his wife.[557] Terry's words here indicate how both she and Irving managed to hold compromising elements whilst also holding their social positions.

Another view of Irving in the 1860s came from Laura Hain Myall (1851-1908), the daughter of the writer James Hain Friswell (1825-1878). Myall recounted her memories of meeting Irving for the first time in 1868, when she was seventeen years old. Her father was a well-connected author and journalist, and was a major figure in London's literary society.[558] They were an upper middle-class family. Myall met many of her father's bohemian friends when they came to call on him. Her recollections of Irving depicted a man crippled with insecurity and devoid of social grace. Irving joined her family for supper after one of his performances in 1868:

> My father talked about the play, and said how much he liked it; but the actor talked very little; he gave me the idea of being melancholy, I thought he was tired.

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[556] Terry, *Story*, 96.

[557] Caroline Dakers, *The Holland Park Circle: Artists and Victorian Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[558] Rosemary Scott, 'Friswell, James Hain (1825–1878)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10187, accessed 4 Feb 2017].

> I didn't know then that silence and seeming lassitude were habitual to him; but so it was, for though I saw him often for four or five years, I do not think I ever saw him cheerful, let alone hilarious.[559]

This description, focusing on his awkwardness and melancholy, is very similar to Terry's. Myall's words here suggest that Irving made others feel uncomfortable, a trait that behavioural advice writers claimed demonstrated a lack of politeness. The negative impression Irving made on Myall was strong enough for her to recall many years later. One evening Irving examined Myall's face in the dining room after pointedly putting on his glasses. She recollected 'that night he quite annoyed me… I became crimson; but Irving was not in the least perturbed. I might have been a picture from the cool way in which he looked at me.'[560] Irving had not behaved as a gentleman towards her in this exchange, and evidently had a lot to learn about the social etiquette of polite society. Another time she recalled seeing Irving the day before the first performance of *The Bells* in 1871. Irving had come to the house to ask her father if he would attend the performance. Again, his sadness and lack of confidence struck her in a brief exchange they had on the stairs:

> As he turned again I saw his face; it was very melancholy; then I put my head over the balusters and said: 'Well! So you are to act in The Bells; are you not glad?' 'It may not be a success,' he said, with a sigh.[561]

In contrast to the other recollections of Irving above Myall offered no counter to this damning representation of Irving. She did not struggle with the master narrative of his life as a self-made man, and did not talk of her knowledge of him in later years. This is possibly because she did not know him later: her only intimate recollection of Irving was as her father's friend in these four or five years before the family moved to Bexleyheath in 1872. Myall's account is credible because she had no loyalty to Irving, and was not concerned with positioning herself socially or professionally in relation to him in the way that Terry, Bancroft or Scott were.

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[559] Laura Hain Friswell, afterwards Myall, *In the Sixties and Seventies: Impressions of Literary People and Others* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1905), 138–39.

[560] Ibid., 139.

[561] Ibid., 148.

These accounts demonstrate that Irving was struggling, well into his adult life, to find 'that unmistakeable something, as subtle as an essence, that makes a gentleman' and which was so crucial to polite status.[562] Irving himself was not unaware that he was gauche and lacking in gentlemanly ease. After Irving's death the actor Charles Wyndham (1837-1919) recalled a conversation with Irving in April 1867. A fashionable London hostess, Adelaide Sartoris (1815-1879) had invited Irving to a party, and Irving requested to borrow Wyndham's dinner jacket for the event. On the next night, Wyndham asked Irving about the party. He replied:

> 'It was very pleasant; but there was a man there whom I desperately envied. He entered the room with a quiet assurance, greeted the hostess as if he conferred a favour, and took a seat with the dignity that one might have expected in a duke!' 'Who was he?' we asked. 'Oh, nobody; a noodle, as it turned out!' Irving was studying the art of self-possession, and was amazed to find a noodle could have it in such perfection.[563]

Wyndham's recollections of this incident were recorded nearly forty years after this event, and although it is unlikely that these were Irving's precise words, he was recalling the spirit of the incident. The impression Wyndham received was that Irving did not feel at ease in polite circles, and did not know how to behave. But it also suggests Irving was aware of what he lacked, and suggests that he was studiously working hard to 'correct' himself. Throughout his adolescence Irving had consciously adapted his self-presentation by observing others, and in this sense he was prepared for the task. He eventually succeeded, as his contemporaries bore witness to. Both Bancroft and Terry compared Irving to the vulgar Jingle in the mid-1860s. But their accounts also demonstrate that Irving became more than Jingle. By the late 1870s he was no longer just pretending to be a gentleman; by this stage Irving had acculturated in polite society. It was only with this change in Irving's bodily practices and behaviour that professional and social success came to him.

This transformation was possible by observing and imitating politeness, both on- and off-stage. It was necessary therefore for Irving to move in polite social circles, and his

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[562] *Mixing in Society*, 38.

[563] Hatton, *Grand Magazine*, December 1905: 707

two main patrons, Charles J. Mathews and J.L. Toole were once again crucial in this. They introduced him into social and professional circles where he could learn how to behave as a gentleman, and through them he met some of the most influential figures of the day. This care for Irving included ensuring that he had appropriate clothing. The actor Seymour Hicks recalled Irving saying that Toole had provided him with his first dress-suit, 'and gave me some warm underclothes too, didn't you, Johnny? Don't forget the vest and pants.'[564] Mathews and Toole invited Irving to dinners, parties and clubs, where he closely observed the way they and other men behaved, how they spoke, the tenor of their conversation, and how they carried themselves. Recollecting his acquaintance with Irving in Glasgow in 1860, the journalist W. Hodgson (dates unknown) described a late-night occasion at a club they had both attended. Hodgson recalled a shy young Irving observing the more experienced men in the room:

> We two are the youngest people in the group; and our pleasure it is… to listen quietly, and add our timid approbations, to the witty repartee as it flashes along, or to the drollery that is tossed about… [Irving] has no disposition to talk except in the monosyllable, and in the brief but genial remark when it is challenged… in this cosy supper room, in which there are men of made reputations (Toole, for instance), he is modestly pleased to take the withdrawal seat beside me.[565]

This vivid account of a professional networking event indicates the process of acculturation into the polite bohemian world of artists and literary men that Irving undertook. In 1860 Irving was twenty-two, but he still had a lot to learn about appropriate polite behaviour and conversation. This extract reveals something of Irving's immaturity and lack of confidence in speaking, and it shows him quietly observing and learning from the older men. But as chapter three demonstrated, Irving never quite mastered the art of good conversation. This perhaps explains why he developed a mysterious air in some polite circles: he dared not speak too much.

When Irving finally got to the West End stage Mathews and Toole made sure to include him in their metropolitan social world. Autobiographies and Irving's correspondence from the 1860s and early 1870s indicate that his network was rapidly

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[564] Edward Seymour Hicks, *Between Ourselves* (London: Cassell & Co, 1930), 118.

[565] Austin Brereton, *The Life of Henry Irving* (London: Longmans Green, 1908), 42–43.

expanding through the social activities that his patrons drew him into. In a letter to his father in January 1867, a few months after his arrival in London, Irving wrote that he had 'been keeping up the season with parties at C. Mathews', Toole's, Howard Paul's, Bancroft's etc.'[566] Charles Mathews and his wife hosted parties on Sundays, which became a regular part of bohemian London's weekly calendar. Because Mathews was one of the most well connected men in London, the guests at these Sunday parties included leading actors, literary men, journalists, artists and influencers of the day, and it cannot be overstated how significant it was to Irving's success to be brought into this social network.

The culture of convivial social networking was a key aspect of bohemian life at this time. In his study of the community of staff contributing to *Punch* in the mid-Victorian years, Patrick Leary has demonstrated the centrality of the culture of conversation and the importance of associational networks in the production of the magazine and its news. The ability to socialise appropriately in polite circles was essential to bringing in the weekly stories, and the demonstration of intellectual agility and wit in conversation at the weekly *Punch* staff dinners allowed certain individuals to exercise influence on editorial direction.[567] Many autobiographies testify to the frequency and significance of this culture of conviviality. Both Toole and Mathews in this regard were models for Irving. Toole was well known for his bonhomie, camaraderie and joviality, characteristics associated with bohemianism. In his obituary of Toole in 1906 the writer Max Beerbohm remarked that the actor had 'never ceased to be a thoroughgoing Bohemian.'[568] Mathews similarly was notorious for his geniality, and was lauded for this aspect of his character in his obituary in the *Morning Post* in 1878:

> He only is liked whose bright talk, pleasant look, and unclouded cheerfulness make people the happier for his presence. Whether in a theatre or in a drawing-room that was precisely what Charles Mathews succeeded in; and to that charming faculty of his, quite as much as to his professional skill, his popularity was to be ascribed. Many an actor of equal ability, but who wanted his delightful

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[566] Henry Irving, 'To Samuel Brodribb', 28 January 1867, 37/7/3, THM.

[567] Patrick Leary, *The Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian London* (London: The British Library Board, 2010).

[568] Max Beerbohm, *Around Theatres*, vol. II. (London: William Heinemann, 1924), 249.

> grace and gaiety of behaviour, have failed to achieve so good a position as Mathews enjoyed.[569]

This paean to Mathews captures exactly what was required for the highest success as an actor at this time: it was one thing to act well, but without grace and charm, without gentility, men could only get so far.

In his memoirs, Clement Scott recalled regularly seeing Irving at parties at Mathews' house in Brompton, where 'the brightest and wittiest men, and women, vied with one another in recounting good stories over the hospitable board, or singing to us in the drawing-room after the convivial feast was over.'[570] These included the playwright H.J Byron (1835-1884), the writers Edmund Yates (1831-1894), George Rose (1817-1882) and Palgrave Simpson (1807-1887).[571] We can assume that Irving, as a regular guest, was also meeting the same people. Scott was a young man himself, like Irving, learning how to perform bohemian masculinity:

> It was a slice of luck indeed that I managed to tuck my young legs so early in life under these famous mahogany trees. Whenever there was a vacant place for one, and dear Mrs Charley asked who should sit in it, her husband generally said: 'Oh, ask the boy; he is such a good listener, and it does one good to hear him laugh. He knows how to hold his tongue, and he knows how to listen well.[572]

As Mathews indicated to his wife, older men expected younger men to listen at these events rather than to dominate, and this is a quality both Scott and Irving shared. Perhaps this was why Mathews enjoyed Irving as his ward. Mathews' great friend Frank Matthews (1807-1871), whom Irving acted with at the St James's Theatre, was a stalwart at these parties, and Irving was soon part of his circle too. Scott recalled 'famous dinner parties' at their 'delightful little one-storey cottage, standing in a pretty garden, at 7

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[569] *Morning Post*, Monday July 1 1878; Issue 33075: 6

[570] Scott, *The Drama*, II:9.

[571] Clement Scott, *The Theatre*, Jan 1 1884: 39

[572] Scott, *The Drama*, II:9.

Linden Grove, Bayswater'.[573] Scott also recalled Irving playing piano and singing at these soirees, 'breathing a genial atmosphere and surrounded by charming company'.[574]

Through this network Irving met his future wife, Florence O'Callaghan (1843-1935), the daughter of an Irish surgeon-general in the Indian service. Florence was born into a wealthy upper middle-class family.[575] Their social backgrounds were therefore different, and Irving was essentially marrying 'above' himself in the Victorian social hierarchy with this match. Florence had been a friend of Mrs Charles Mathews and through her had come into the same network as Irving. Toole, Scott, Mrs Charles Mathews and Mrs Frank Matthews were involved in bringing the couple together during their courtship period from December 1866 to their marriage on 15 July 1869.[576] It was not a happy marriage and the couple separated after just one year in the autumn of 1870. They were reconciled in early 1871, but separated for the final time in March 1872. I will return to the consequences of this marriage for Irving's reputation later in the chapter, but here it is important to note the power of his social network in that it enabled him to make a match above his own social origins.

The significance of residential location for enabling socialising should also be noted here. Close networks of artists congregated in particular areas in London such as the bohemian circle that emerged around the Holland Park area from the 1850s. This also occurred in the theatrical community, and by the 1860s Brompton in particular was known as a fashionable neighbourhood in which leading West End actors resided.[577] Charles J. Mathews, for example, lived in Pelham Crescent off the Fulham Road, in the same road as his friends the actors Robert Keeley (1973-1869) and Mary Anne Keeley (1805-1899). Residing close to others in the theatre world made socialising convenient because of the irregular hours that acting demanded. There were other fashionable residential enclaves in which actors lived which crossed over with artistic communities, including Bayswater, St John's Wood and Bloomsbury. The proximity of residential

[573] Ibid., II:7.

[574] Ibid., II:191.

[575] Henry Irving, 'To Samuel Brodribb', 26 April 1871, 37/7/3, THM. Irving tells Samuel that Florence's father Daniel O'Callaghan had recently retired on £900 p.a.

[576] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', April 1869, 37/1/9, THM.

[577] Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Croom Helm, 1978).

location was a factor in Irving's initial meeting with Florence: the O'Callaghans lived at 2 Horbury Crescent, just a couple of streets from the Tooles in Orme Square.[578] It was surely no coincidence also that Irving and his wife moved into 5 Linden Grove in Bayswater after they were married, right next door to the 'delightful little one-storey cottage' where Frank Matthews and his wife were living, and close to Toole's house.[579] Later, when Irving and his wife were looking for a bigger home, Irving viewed houses in Kensington as well as in Bloomsbury. They eventually settled at 14 Wharfedale Road in West Brompton, another area with a large artistic community. Their home was close to North End Lane were the pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) lived, and just a few streets away from where Ellen Terry was soon to reside.

Irving had already experienced the benefits of living in close proximity to influential people. For a time he lodged at 117 Great Russell Street in Bloomsbury, just around the corner from the author James Hain Friswell on Southampton Street. It is likely that Toole was responsible for Irving's initial introduction to James Hain Friswell, as the two older men had been good friends for many years.[580] His daughter later recollected the experience of meeting the many literary and artistic guests who came to her father's house in the 1860s and 1870s, including the writer George Du Maurier (1834-1896) who also lived on Russell Street, and the artist Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912). She observed the frequency of Irving's presence in her home: 'Living so near, Irving was often in our house, coming in and out as he liked'.[581] Irving's network expanded as he met other influential men through Hain Friswell. Edward Clarke (1841-1931), for example, who had been a pupil at the same school as Irving and who went on to become a successful society lawyer, recalled meeting Irving at Hain Friswell's house.[582] Irving surely had in mind the benefits that residential location could bring when he was looking for new homes.

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[578] TNA 1861 ESW Census RG09/14/50/32.

[579] TNA 1871 ESW Census RG10/36/11/13.

[580] Friswell, afterwards Myall, *In the Sixties*.

[581] Ibid., 146.

[582] Edward Clarke, *The Story of My Life* (London: John Murray, 1918), 72.

The concentrated topography of London's West End in the mid-Victorian years and the blurring of boundaries between public and private space was also significant for Irving's integration into the world of bohemian London.[583] Close proximity to the cafes, clubs, supper rooms and working spaces of those involved in bohemian London meant that opportunities for socialising often occurred informally or by chance. Squire Bancroft, as we have already seen, first met Irving through a mutual friend as they were walking in the Burlington Arcade. Soon after, Irving was attending parties at Bancroft's home. Bancroft mentioned in this recollection that Irving had a lodging in Old Quebec Street, which suggests he visited Irving there. Clement Scott recalled how he met Irving for the first time in 1866 when a mutual friend who was acting with Irving brought him to meet Scott in his office nearby: 'Charles said to me, "I have come to introduce you to a comrade of mine, Henry Irving, about whom you have already written some very kind things; he is anxious to make your acquaintance."'[584] Similarly, not long afterwards Irving and Scott began to socialise together in private, domestic locations.

The journalist and playwright John Hollingshead (1827-1904) recalled meeting Irving through his friend Toole, and they had supper together one evening at Toole's chambers on Exeter Arcade, located just off the Strand.[585] Hollingshead was an influential figure in mid-Victorian bohemia, writing for publications such as *Household Words*, *The Morning Post* and *Punch*, as well as founding the bohemian club The Arundel, which Irving later joined. This introduction served Irving well when in 1868 Hollingshead took on the management of the new Gaiety Theatre on Aldwych and brought Irving into the cast. Whilst Irving was acting there, the playwright James Albery (1838-1899) introduced himself in writing, requesting that he meet Irving at the Edinburgh Tavern on the Strand, just a minute away, to discuss a character he was developing specifically for him.[586] This meeting led to Irving's successful role as Digby Grant in *The Two Roses* at the Vaudeville Theatre and was the start of a firm friendship between the men. This kind of quick and informal social and professional networking was possible because the working locations

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[583] J.S. Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage: Marriage, Management and the Mapping of Gender in London, 1830-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[584] Scott, *The Drama*, II:2.

[585] John Hollingshead, *My Lifetime* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co, 1895), 205.

[586] James Albery to Henry Irving April 1870 quoted in Henry Chance Newton, *Cues and Curtain Calls* (London: John Lane, 1927), 20.

of bohemian London were all within walking distance of each other. Irving's correspondence from this period indicates the active part he took as both host and guest to actors, playwrights, journalists, stage designers and literary men.[587] In this way Irving was able to expand his network quickly, demonstrating once again the significance of geographical context to the individual. Further, by embedding himself amongst these influential people Irving was effectively constructing a safety net, gathering friends who were likely to support him in later years.

Policing Irving's authenticity

Although Irving eventually acculturated into polite society, his authenticity as a gentleman always remained in question. I have suggested that polite society policed membership of the group by measuring suspected interlopers against the ideals of polite culture, and that men like Irving were under constant pressure to defend their status in a way that other gentlemen by birth were not. Chapters two and three showed criticisms which appeared in the press suggesting the shortcomings of Irving's education and social background, mocking his claimed status as a gentleman. In this section I will argue that Irving's bodily practices were also targeted as inauthentic. These criticisms came in newspaper reviews about Irving's unusual voice and physical characteristics when he was acting, but I suggest that they were more than just criticisms of his acting ability – they were also veiled criticisms of his claim to polite social status. Irving's awareness of these negative newspaper reviews (he studiously collected reviews throughout his career) must have contributed to his desire to bolster his reputation by constructing a particular story about his life in the 1883 biography. Further, I suggest that his experience of questions around his social status made him more aware of the need to protect himself from any other negative aspects of his personal life that might be used against him in this way. Irving had fallen well below the ideals of respectable polite culture in two ways in particular: his problems with debt, and the breakdown of his marriage. This section will begin by providing evidence of some of the critical theatre reviews that Irving received

[587] Henry Irving, 'To Alfred Darbyshire', 10 October 1868, Private collection; Henry Irving, 'To Frank Marshall', 1868, BTMA 1963/G/49, THM; Henry Irving, 'To James Albery', 7 September 1870, 37/1/10, THM.

and will suggest how journalists read his bodily practices on stage as indicators of his class. Then I will detail the problems Irving encountered with debt and his marriage, which left him vulnerable to further questioning of his status. In the final section I will discuss how Irving constructed himself as an eccentric and a bohemian, harnessing the positive power of these Victorian cultural ideas to counter his weaknesses.

Theatre reviews of Irving's performances in his early career suggest that he was struggling to perform gentility convincingly on stage. He was cast many times in the character of a gentleman, and theatre critics were rarely warm in their praise of these performances. In Clement Scott's memoirs he recounted a review of Irving as Slipton Slasher in *The Porter's Knot*: 'he received the distinction of a severe "slating", pointing out his jerky walk, his stiff neck, and his spasmodic elocution, and asking if such personalities were "Nature's idea of a gentleman".[588] The reviewer here was using the language of Samuel Smiles' self-making to mock Irving's inability to perform convincingly as a polite man. These criticisms of Irving were frequent during his twenties. As Doricourt in *The Belle's Stratagem* at the St James's Theatre in October 1866 the critic of *The Morning Post* commented that Irving, 'wants the courtly air and the dash of polished gallantry' that the character required.[589] Four months later, the critic of *The Morning Post* made similar comments about Irving in another performance: 'he seems to us to miss the elegance and refinement of manner by which the part ought to be distinguished. There is plenty of remorse and anguish but no vestige of the dash and brilliancy of the man of fashion.'[590] And in the performance which first brought Irving together on stage with Ellen Terry, *Katherine and Petruchio* at the Queen's Theatre in December 1867, the critic of *The Times* was harsh in his indictment of Irving's ability to play the gentleman:

> Those who are old enough to recollect the late Mr Charles Kemble's Petruchio will easily bring to mind the gentlemanlike rollick with which he carried off the extravagancies of the shrew tamer, showing that at bottom he was a man of high breeding… No impression of this kind is left by Mr. H. Irving. His early scenes are feeble, and when he has brought home his bride he suggests the notion rather of

[588] Scott, *The Drama*, II:6.

[589] *The Morning Post*, October 8, 1866; Issue 28962: 3.

[590] *The Morning Post*, February 11, 1867; Issue 29070: 3.

> a brigand chief who has secured a female captive than of an honest gentleman.[591]

Irving's acting apparently left a lot to be desired. But this critic was also suggesting something about Irving's vulgar social position: the comparison to a 'brigand chief' hinted at Irving's coarseness; further, the actor Charles Kemble had been able to play this character well because he was a gentleman himself, unlike Irving.

Whilst Irving could not always quite pull off the character of a gentleman, he was adept at playing characters that were imitating gentlemen – in other words, 'Jingle' characters. When Irving played the character of Jingle at the Lyceum in October 1871, *The Times* reported that 'the offhand pomp of [Jingle's] manner is capitally assumed by Mr. H. Irving'.[592] This was a role Irving excelled at, perhaps because at this stage it was commensurate with his behaviour and bodily practices off-stage. Similarly, Irving received critical praise as the shabby sponger Digby Grant in *The Two Roses* at the Vaudeville Theatre in 1870, a character who seems to have been based on the similar literary character of William Dorrit in Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857).

Critics were frequently harsh about what they perceived as Irving's physical abnormalities and peculiarities of elocution on stage. These comments, I suggest, were not simply criticisms of his acting ability, they also functioned as indicators of his social background: they implied that he was not able to conduct himself with the ease of a gentleman. The critic William Archer (1856-1924), for example, said of Irving's speech and bearing: 'he walks like an automaton whose wheels need oiling, and speaks alternately from the pit of his stomach and the top of his head… Moreover, his pronunciation of English is a study in itself'.[593] On Irving's voice the novelist Henry James (1843-1916) commented in 1880:

> Mr Irving's peculiarities and eccentricities of speech are so strange, so numerous, so personal to himself, his views of pronunciation, of modulation, of elocution so

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[591] *The Times*, Dec 30, 1867; Issue 26007: 9.

[592] *The Times*, Oct 25, 1871; Issue 27203: 6.

[593] William Archer, *The Fashionable Tragedian: A Criticism* (Edinburgh: T Gray & Co, 1877), 7.

> highly developed… that the spectator who desires to be in sympathy with him finds himself confronted with a bristling hedge of difficulties.[594]

Even Irving's leading lady Ellen Terry was critical of his voice, recalling that 'Irving's imitators could make people burst with laughter when they took off his delivery... indeed, the original, too, was almost provocative of laughter.'[595] Terry was familiar with the connotations of class in the awkwardness of bodily movement and issues with elocution, and again used Irving here as a foil to her own status. Irving's physical features, in particular his long legs and the way he walked, were also frequently lampooned. In 1877 Archer commented on this aspect of Irving's acting:

> In walking, he plants one foot upon the stage as if his whole 'eminence' depended upon its firmness, and then drags the other leg after it in a limp and nerveless fashion, which cannot be described, and must be seen to be appreciated, - all the while working spasmodically with his shoulders, and very often nodding his head backwards and forwards in a manner which is positively painful to contemplate.[596]

Irving's facial features were noteworthy enough for frequent comment by contemporaries. Archer pointed to the pallor and thinness of Irving's face and remarked on his 'high narrow forehead, the marked and overhanging but flexible eye-brows, the dark eyes which can be by turns so penetrating, so dreamy, so sinister, and so melancholy, the thin straight mouth, the hollow cheeks and marvellously mobile jaw.'[597] Paradoxically, whilst these comments were damning of Irving's acting abilities and social status, at the same time they contributed to his reputation, as I shall demonstrate in the final part of this chapter.

Irving's ambiguous performances of gentility on stage contributed to questions about the authenticity of his social status off stage. But aspects of Irving's private life also had potentially damaging consequences for his reputation and standing in society. Irving struggled with debt and his income was insufficient to keep up with his outgoings until

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[594] Henry James, *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama: 1872-1901* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949), 139.

[595] Terry, *Story*, 82.

[596] Archer, *Fashionable Tragedian*, 7.

[597] William Archer, *Henry Irving, Actor and Manager. A Critical Study* (London: Field & Tuer, 1883), 47.

well into the 1870s when he was in his thirties. By this time Irving had married, and during this unhappy marriage he had been unable to match up to polite masculine ideals as the breadwinner of an upper-middle class family. Historian John Tosh has suggested that £300 a year was the minimum needed to maintain this social position.[598] Irving's income and the repayments on his debts left him well short of this amount. Historian Margot Finn has argued that incurring debt was regarded as a misfortune rather than a moral failing on the part of the debtor in Victorian society.[599] Whilst this was certainly one of the ways in which those who incurred debt were perceived, historians have questioned this argument, suggesting that other views circulated depending on what kind of debt it was.[600] In her research on bankruptcy in the Victorian novel, Barbara Weiss argues that the ways in which mid nineteenth-century novelists such as Thackeray, Dickens, Elliot and Trollope represented bankruptcy, or even the threat of it, suggests that there was both a moral stigma attached to financial failure and sympathy with the unfortunate individual caught up in rapidly-changing economic circumstances out of their control. Characters who eventually managed to pay their creditors back after great personal sacrifice and hard work were lauded. Furthermore, Weiss argues, the theme of bankruptcy in Victorian novels became a metaphor for social disintegration and the loosening of community ties.[601] Victorian ideas on bankruptcy, therefore, were complex and shifting, and feelings of humiliation and disgrace were certainly attached to it.

From early on in his acting career until at least 1872 Irving was constantly in debt. Irving's personal correspondence provides evidence of his constant requests for loans from family and friends, and that his survival was dependent on others. Finn argues that 'formal and informal loans, gifts of money and of goods, begging, borrowing, cadging and ultimately flight were essential economic strategies' in the Victorian era – and this was

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[598] John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 12.

[599] Margot Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[600] Ben Griffin, 'Review of The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740–1914', *Reviews in History*, no. review no. 435 (February 2005), [http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/435 Date accessed: 5 March, 2017].

[601] Barbara Weiss, *The Hell of the English: Bankruptcy and the Victorian Novel* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1986).

certainly Irving's experience.[602] Finn's research focuses on the ways in which credit relations operated between customers and traders, but also within the individual's network of family and friends, in which 'a scaffolding of extra-legal customs, obligations and expectations' operated.[603] The first example of Irving using his network in this way is indicated in a letter to the wife of a fellow actor in Manchester, Mrs Joseph Robins, probably written in 1861. Addressed from 'The Abode of Misery' Irving requested a loan of a shilling from her, part of which he would use to get a haircut. In jest he asked Mrs Robins not to tell her husband in case he thought Irving had fallen into further dissipation.[604] Irving was clearly by this time starting to get a reputation amongst his circle for financial mismanagement, but his money problems became acute when he was dismissed from the stock company of the Theatre Royal in Manchester in February 1865. For the rest of 1865 Irving had no fixed position in any stock company, and was out of work for weeks at a time. He constantly moved around the country and took acting positions where he could, travelling substantial distances for just one night's work.

During this period of scant employment Irving requested to borrow money from several friends, and became increasingly desperate. At the beginning of September 1865, for example, Irving wrote to his friend Thomas Chambers, the treasurer of the Theatre Royal, Manchester, asking to borrow £2 for a fortnight. This was a small sum, but is an indication of just how short of money he was at this stage.[605] In November 1865 Irving wrote to his wealthy friend Christopher Bradshaw in Manchester for help in arranging a financial transaction, probably a loan.[606] And then in early January 1866 Irving sent a letter from Liverpool to an unknown recipient in Manchester requesting another loan of £2 for two weeks. In this letter he described himself as 'getting callous about England'; clearly he was losing heart about his future prospects and mentioned a meeting he was due to have that week with an American theatre manager Henry C. Jarrett (1828-1903).[607] Moving to America became a serious option for Irving.

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[602] Finn, *Character of Credit*, 2.

[603] Ibid., 95.

[604] Henry Irving, 'To Mrs Joseph Robins', c 1861, Add.MS.40730.f.82, BL.

[605] Henry Irving, 'To Thomas Chambers', 7 September 1865, Box 7, Folder 17, HLC.

[606] Henry Irving, 'To Christopher Bradshaw', 8 November 1865, 37/7/44, THM.

[607] Henry Irving, 'To Unknown', 7 January 1866, published in The Daily Telegraph 14 March 1938.

A reprieve came, however, with an offer of regular work at the Prince of Wales Theatre in Liverpool, where Irving acted with his patron Charles J. Mathews for a time. The booming fortunes of Liverpool as a provincial power during these years undoubtedly assisted Irving in his success at finding work here.[608] Nevertheless it is likely that Mathews played a part in securing him this position. This employment was not enough to stave off his financial ruin however, and in May 1866 Irving was awarded bankruptcy.[609] Irving was lucky in the timing of his bankruptcy, which occurred after reforms to the legal system had been made in the 1860s, which meant that he, unlike his father in 1842, avoided imprisonment for his debt.[610] Bankrupt and out of work, Irving's prospects were bleak in May 1866. At this point his other patron J.L. Toole stepped in to ensure Irving had an income in the short-term by taking him on a lucrative tour at the start of the summer.[611] Whether Toole was aware that Irving was bankrupt is not known, but he provided Irving with enough income to settle his debts, for which he received an Order of Discharge from bankruptcy on 3 August 1866.[612]

Irving's discharge from bankruptcy in August 1866 was not the end of his money troubles, however. Although Irving's luck appeared to be changing with an offer of employment on the West End stage in September 1866, inevitably his day-to-day financial demands rapidly increased with his relocation to London. Again Irving relied on his network for survival. Evidence of money transactions between Irving and his father begin in early 1867, and this paternal assistance continued for several years. In a letter dated 28 Jan 1867 Irving wrote to his father: 'I have had very heavy calls this week. It's very annoying and all most distressing to be so worried but it is useless complaining and the matter must be faced and got rid of.'[613] Clearly Irving was back in debt and needed

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[608] Tristram Hunt, *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004).

[609] *The London Gazette*, 11 May 1866; Issue 23117: 3050.

[610] G. R Rubin, 'Law, Poverty and Imprisonment for Debt 1869-1914', in *Law, Economy and Society, 1750-1914: Essays in the History of English Law*, ed. G. R Rubin and David Sugarman (Abingdon: Professional Books, 1984), 241–99; Paul Johnson, 'Creditors, Debtors, and the Law in Victorian and Edwardian England', in *Private Law and Social Inequality in the Industrial Age. Comparing Legal Cultures in Britain, France, Germany and the United States*, ed. Steinmetz Willibald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 485–504.

[611] Brereton, *The Life*, 74.

[612] *The London Gazette*, 3 August 1866; Issue 23321: 6049.

[613] Irving, 'Samuel 28 Jan. 1867'.

his father, who now lived in Bristol with his siblings, to tide him over financially. The burden of his debts became more pressing when he met and fell in love with his future wife Florence O'Callaghan. A letter from Irving to Florence dated Christmas Eve 1866 indicates that Irving was by this time fond of her, describing her as the 'Fairie Queene'.[614] By July 1867 the couple were courting in secret. Irving, still in debt, wrote to Florence to say that they could not yet get married, hinting at financial reasons: 'I lived a reckless, never wicked life – what had I to care for? Now a being to work for, to worship, rises before me and I can but regret that all I offer must lie in the future.'[615] It was not until the end of March 1869 that Irving cleared the majority of his debts, and wrote to Florence that 'save and excepting two or three trifles, I am free'.[616] Whilst Irving was clearly in a better position financially at this stage, there was little money to spare: in May 1869 Irving wrote to Florence that the next time they met he would not owe any money to anyone and should have £4 extra to pay for the marriage.[617]

Irving and Florence married on 15 July 1869, but Irving very soon encountered financial problems once more. He again turned to his father for assistance, and their correspondence is peppered with the negotiation of loans, the rate of interest Irving would offer, and the exchange of post office orders (P.O.O.) for relatively small sums of money. On 26 September 1870, for example, Irving enclosed a P.O.O. for thirty shillings in a letter to his father, which also included news of Irving's new-born son.[618] Two weeks later Irving sent his father another P.O.O., whilst simultaneously requesting a share of his recently-deceased uncle's estate: 'If you can, before depositing your share, spare me five pounds, I shall be glad.'[619] On the 23 December Irving once again transferred a sum by P.O.O. to his father, this time £2.[620] The small sums moving between father and son suggest Irving was in acute financial difficulties. In 1871 the value of Irving's requests for loans increased significantly. In April he sent his father a proposal for a loan of £50:

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[614] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', 24 December 1866, 37/1/8, THM.

[615] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', 14 July 1867, THM/37/1/9, THM.

[616] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', 23 March 1869, 37/1/9, THM.

[617] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', 25 May 1869, 37/1/9, THM.

[618] Henry Irving, 'To Samuel Brodribb', 26 September 1870, 37/7/3, THM.

[619] Henry Irving, 'To Samuel Brodribb', 10 October 1870, 37/7/3, THM.

[620] Henry Irving, 'To Samuel Brodribb', 23 December 1870, 37/7/3, THM.

> And now, I'm going to make a proposal which I hope you'll thoroughly understand in the spirit in which it is made. It is, that you give me the use of £50 for which I'll pay you weekly, monthly or quarterly, more than you can get for it by any other investment. What I need it for is to defray some necessary and rather heavy expenses we shall soon have in entering our new house…. we need carpets and curtains and a heap of things which I've not ready money to buy. I thought, therefore, you'd as gladly give me the use of what would help to make us comfortable and be of so much service – as any company – especially too as I'll pay you for it more than you could obtain elsewhere? What say you? [621]

The fact that Irving offered his father 'more than you can get for it by any other investment' suggests that his options were restricted, and he was perhaps finding it hard to find credit anywhere else. The letter also demonstrates Irving's inability to live up to the cultural expectations of upper middle-class husbands, who were expected to provide a home and lifestyle that demonstrated a particular level of social status for their family. Florence certainly humiliated Irving for this failing.

The marriage was fraught with tensions over money. A. James Hammerton's research shows that a husband's inability to generate sufficient income was often a considerable factor in marital tensions and marriage breakdown amongst the middle classes in the Victorian period.[622] Evidence of tensions between Irving and his wife on this subject are indicated in a letter he sent to Florence in the summer of 1870 while he was on a provincial tour:

> Here is £1 – more – all the extra money I can send you this week… You needn't trouble, dear, to send me any account of how you spend your £6 – you never waste anything. What do you reckon is owing to you? I should be glad to know, that I may see whether your book keeping tallies with mine… Don't think I am so unmanly and cowardly as to leave you encumbered with debt and fatten my carcass at the expense of a woman in child.[623]

This extract signals the challenging and testing of Victorian middle-class marital roles between husband and wife: Irving as breadwinner and Florence as manager of the

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[621] Henry Irving, 'To Samuel Brodribb', 28 April 1871, 37/7/3, THM.

[622] A. James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Married Life* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[623] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', Summer 1870, 37/1/11, THM.

household. It appears that their household finances did not add up, and to deflect blame away from herself Florence accused Irving of owing her money and offered to send Irving her accounts. Irving's response was designed to reassure her of his confidence in her, but at the same time attempted to assert a degree of control by requesting her to verify the amount she thought he owed her. Irving had to deny that he would abandon her while she was pregnant, rejecting claims that he was 'unmanly and cowardly' – presumably from caustic words she had written in a previous letter. Irving surely felt humiliated by this attack from his wife, especially as he could only send her the small sum of £1 at her request for more funds. By the end of November 1870 their marriage had broken down and Florence had returned to live with her parents.[624]

Two months later the couple were reconciled, but money continued to be a huge source of tension between them. The following letters sent in the summer of 1871 from Irving, who was again on a provincial tour, to his wife back in London illustrate some of this tension. Florence's letters to Irving have not survived, but something of the pitch of the anger she directed at him is discernible in his responses. On 25 May 1871 Irving wrote:

> The fewest words I write will be the kindest. I will confine myself to the 'substance' as you term it, of your ten fond pages – the house… whatever place you take will suit me. Your words discontent me and as long as they continue a palace will be as unbearable as a hovel.[625]

The sarcasm directed at his wife in Irving's reference to her 'ten fond pages' demonstrates the strain their relationship was under. By this stage Irving regarded her as querulous, evident in a letter to her the next day about furniture: 'I can foresee the regrets there would be at not having this and not having that, did we get but half of our requirements.'[626] With these words Irving was indicating to Florence his anticipation that she would criticise him for being unable to provide enough.

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[624] Henry Irving, 'To Samuel Brodribb', 29 November 1870, 37/7/3, THM.

[625] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', 25 May 1871, 37/7/6, THM.

[626] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', 26 May 1871, 37/7/6, THM.

Although the couple found a resolution for this particular crisis when Florence negotiated an affordable rent on a suitable property, Irving yet again found himself unable to find ready money for the furnishings and fittings and suggested they buy on credit. He looked to his network once more for support, and indicated that he would refer the furnishing company to Toole and her father 'as a guarantee of our undoubted probity, respectability and any other ility' even though he was aware that such requests were 'offensive at all times'.[627] In a letter to Florence a few days later Irving elaborated on their options: she could lend him her money; or she could ask her father for a loan; finally he advised her how to obtain credit at a furnishing company:

> Your worldly wisdom I suppose has taught you that to obtain a favour – never appear to seek it. Ask for credit and it is pretty sure to be refused. Go to Hammond's – and you might go – introduced by your father – who has dealt with them – you say you want to spend £50 or £60 'delighted' of course, they say and you say of course I shall expect the usual credit.[628]

This passage demonstrates Irving's awareness of the importance of self-presentation in accessing credit, and how others perceived social status.[629] His advice to his wife was not about what to wear or her accent – for he was not concerned about the credibility of Florence's external class credentials – but rather the tone and manner in which she asserted her authority. Irving clearly demonstrated here his consciousness of perceptions of authority, a subject he had paid close attention to over the years.

By March 1872 the relationship between Irving and Florence had broken down irrevocably. Irving's letters to Florence since the summer of 1871 indicate that their financial situation continued to be a source of great friction. Irving believed that his wife always took the 'lugubrious view' of their resources.[630] Irving continued to rely on his father for financial liquidity until at least the end of 1872, even taking out an insurance policy on his own life so that his father would not be left penniless if he died.[631] Ironically

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[627] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', 31 May 1871, 37/1/8, THM.

[628] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', 1 June 1871, 37/1/11, THM.

[629] Finn, *Character of Credit*.

[630] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', 18 July 1871, 37/7/7, THM.

[631] Henry Irving, 'To Samuel Brodribb', 12 October 1872, 37/1/12, THM.

Irving was on the brink of great wealth just as the couple separated. In 1872 Irving was finally in a position to provide the kind of lifestyle that Florence had always wanted. By this stage, however, their marriage was beyond repair.

During Irving's struggle with debt he had personally experienced the detrimental power of gossip, which might explain in part why he went to great lengths to protect his reputation in later years. At some point in 1868 his friend Christopher Bradshaw (b. 1841) had said something compromising about Irving, possibly about his debts, to Florence's mother at a dinner party, which had turned her implacably against him as a suitor. This gossip temporarily ended his contact with Florence.[632] In May 1869, when Florence's mother was told about the renewal of their relationship, she wrote Irving a disparaging letter. Writing to Florence, Irving disputed her mother's accusations:

> The lies so wickedly circulated should but be treated with contempt. As I write this my blood boils and I cannot, will not stoop to discuss reports so false and base. Your mother dearest will I sincerely hope, dismiss such infamous scandals from her heart – and until she does, there never can be re-established the confidence which once existed between us. I admit and bitterly repent my folly in money matters – I mean my getting into debt and paying exorbitant interest for certain monies – but beyond this fault I have none for which I could be reproached.[633]

Florence's mother certainly believed that being in debt was disgraceful. It is likely that there were other sexual scandals surrounding Irving that she also charged against him. In January 1868 Irving had rebuked Florence for suggesting an inappropriate relationship between him and the actress Nellie Moore, and it is possible that rumours of this had reached Florence's mother.[634] After their marriage broke down in 1872 Florence again accused Irving of having inappropriate relations with the actress Isabel Bateman, which he denied. Given his previous experience of the damaging potential of gossip, he quickly moved to stamp it down.[635]

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[632] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', July 1868, 37/1/8, THM.

[633] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', 16 May 1869.

[634] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', January 1868, 37/7/4, THM.

[635] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', October 1872, 37/1/11, THM.

Irving the artistic genius

The events of Irving's private life left him open to criticism from a snobbish elite at the zenith of his career in the early 1880s when he was one of the leading public figures in society and had assumed the position of unofficial head of the Victorian stage. Throughout the previous chapters I have indicated how Irving used the power of the Victorian cultural idea of self-making to deflect criticism from his social background. But Irving also benefited from the positive connotations of two other Victorian cultural ideas, bohemianism and eccentricity, which he actively used to deflect criticism of his private misdemeanours. Bohemians and eccentrics were highly valued in Victorian society and their indiscretions and pushing of respectable boundaries, were more acceptable.

Chapter one outlined how eccentric figures came to be aligned with genius and cultural authority by the mid-nineteenth century. Whilst Irving's unusual physical attributes provided grist to his critics' mills in terms of his acting abilities, they also began to contribute to Irving's reputation as a genius. These extraordinary physical features and their effect on his acting made Irving the talk of the town, and divided opinion starkly. Writing on the state of English theatre in 1877 Henry James said of Irving:

> I am told that London is divided, on the subject of his merits, into two fiercely hostile camps; that he has sown dissention in families, and made old friends cease to 'speak'. His appearance in a new part is a great event; and if one has the courage of one's opinion, at dinner tables and elsewhere, a conversational godsend.[636]

Although Ellen Terry was critical of Irving's elocution, recalling in her autobiography how his contemporaries mockingly imitated his voice, for her they were merely mimicking Irving's 'eccentric body without the sublime soul'.[637] Terry here connected physical singularities with special qualities – a 'sublime soul' in Irving's case. She therefore reinforced the cultural idea of the eccentric and associated Irving with romanticism by referencing the sublime. Her legacy as one of the great actresses of the nineteenth

[636] James, *Scenic Art*, 102.

[637] Terry, *Story*, 82.

century depended to a degree on Irving's high reputation, so it is hard to know whether she genuinely believed that Irving was a genius. In her memoirs Terry recalled Irving asking her about the criticisms of his stage voice and mannerisms:

> He asked me later on if I thought the ill-natured criticism of his walk was justified, and if he really said 'Gud' for 'God', and the rest of it. I said straight out that he did say his vowels in a peculiar way, and that he did drag his leg.[638]

Clearly Irving was aware of issues with his comportment and elocution, but there is no evidence to suggest that he attempted to train them away over time. This perhaps indicates that Irving actively embraced these physical eccentricities. He had witnessed at close hand the power and command that the eccentric voice, mannerisms and physiognomy of the actor could bring to bear on audiences, and the reputation that could result from it. His patron J.L. Toole was well known for what he himself termed 'eccentric comedy'.[639] His biographer Michael Read attributed Toole's success in part to the 'peculiarities of his physique, physiognomy, and voice.'[640] Just as Irving was known for his physical eccentricities, so too were other towering figures of the nineteenth-century stage, including one of the men from whom he learnt the most. The experiences of both Toole and Irving demonstrated that exceptional physical attributes could be actively beneficial in Victorian theatre, and helped strengthen their reputations. Max Beerbohm certainly held this opinion, writing in 1905 that although Irving could appear in a rather ridiculous light, it nonetheless added to his reputation. Beerbohm wrote that critics would say, "'Why does he walk like this? Why does he talk like that?' But, for any one equipped to appreciate him, his gait and his utterance were not less dear than his face – were part of a harmony that was fine as it was strange."[641] In Beerbohm's view there was a positive association between unusual bodies and eccentricity.

The Victorians sometimes used other words with or in place of eccentric including genius, mysterious, other-worldly, odd, queer, exceptional, singular, peculiar, inimitable,

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[638] Ibid., 99.

[639] Joseph Hatton, *Reminiscences of J. L. Toole* (London: Hurst and Blackett Ltd, 1889), 92.

[640] Michael Read, 'Toole, John Lawrence (1830–1906)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36536, accessed 5 March 2016].

[641] Beerbohm, *Around Theatres*, II.:177.

quaint, extraordinary, strange, uncommon and unusual. Brereton littered Irving's 1883 biography with all these terms, repeatedly associating Irving with exceptionality. For example, called upon to give his first recitation in front of fellow students as a teenager Irving 'fairly electrified the class with an unusual display of elocutionary skill and dramatic intensity'; so far had Irving come since then that his elocution master 'would have delighted in the thought that he had some share in fostering and developing the genius of one so deservedly esteemed as the foremost English actor of his age.'[642] And Brereton cited many press reviews in which Irving was described with terms such as 'genius', 'inimitable' and 'extraordinary'.[643] He cited celebratory speeches in which Irving's contemporaries referred to his 'genius', his 'peculiar powers', his 'singular magnetic quality' and his 'exceptional and unusual power.'[644]

Irving's contemporaries used all of these terms repeatedly thereafter to describe Irving and his achievements. These terms had of course been used to describe Irving before 1883, but they were in ephemeral, historical and dispersed sources such as press articles and speeches. Brereton's 1883 biography was the first extended record of his life including a collation of celebratory press reviews, speeches and accolades, and it became the official reference book on him. Contemporaries who later wrote biographical information about Irving's life repeated at least part of the information or the themes that appeared in this book, and many referred to his eccentric qualities. In Toole's memoirs, for example, he recollected that people found Irving strange in the early days of his career in the late 1850s: '[Irving] used to go up to Calton Hill in Edinburgh at all hours and study, and somehow this was considered odd, but he was a little odd, that is to those who did not know him'.[645] Read with the positive connotations of eccentricity in mind, Toole's reference to his great friend Irving as 'odd' appears more like a compliment than a criticism. Toole here reinforced the idea that Irving had not constructed his eccentricities but rather that they had always been natural to him. Other contemporaries discussed Irving in eccentric terms. In 1906 Irving's long-serving theatre manager Bram

[642] Austin Brereton, *Henry Irving: A Biographical Sketch* (London: David Bogue, 1883), 8.

[643] Ibid., 65, 77, 84.

[644] Ibid., 70, 78, 98, 121, 159, 161.

[645] Hatton, *Reminiscences*, 97.

Stoker (1847-1912) talked of the 'magnetism of his genius'.[646] In his memoirs of Irving, the writer W.H. Pollock (1850-1926) described his old friend Irving as having 'peculiar genius'.[647] Pollock furthermore referred to Irving's 'magnetic personality', his 'singular fascination' and his ability to '"wile the bird off the tree" by the force and attraction of his individuality'.[648] Whilst these accounts of Irving must be read with the limitations of Victorian conventions of auto/biographical writing in mind, nevertheless, they do indicate that Irving was discussed in the terms of eccentricity and this benefitted his reputation.

Irving also styled himself as a bohemian gentleman as a defence against the aspects of his private life that did not match up to ideals of polite culture. As chapter one indicated, the idea of the bohemian in the Victorian imagination was 'subversive, but also safe', providing gentlemen with the opportunity to deviate from social conventions in their youth before an inevitable return to the bourgeois world. Irving had been familiar with the figure of the eccentric from his youth. His schoolmaster William Pinches, an influential man in Irving's formative years, had the appearance of a man who might be described as bohemian. He had a certain exotic flair about him, romantic and Byronic in his style. It is likely that Pinches inspired Irving to become an actor, but what he also surely did was to give Irving the opportunity to closely observe and become familiar with a man who demonstrated artistic difference through his self-presentation. As a teenage clerk living amongst his lower middle-class kin in London Irving was far from bohemian in his appearance. In Brereton's 1883 biography his childhood friend Charles Dyall described how he appeared as a fifteen-year old boy: 'his appearance was such as would make ladies say "what a nice boy!" He was rather tall for his age, dressed in a black cloth suit, with what was called a round jacket, and deep white linen collar turned over it.'[649] A photographic portrait of Irving (see figure 5, page 308) illustrates the next sartorial phase of his young manhood. The date of this photograph is unknown, but it is likely to have been taken around 1856 when Irving was eighteen and still living with his parents in London. It was taken at a time when studio portrait photography was relatively new but

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[646] Bram Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (London: William Heinemann, 1906), 19.

[647] W.H. Pollock, *Impressions of Henry Irving Gathered in Public and Private During a Friendship of Many Years* (London: Longmans Green, 1908), 28.

[648] Ibid., 42.

[649] Brereton, *Biographical Sketch*, 8.

was rapidly expanding in London.[650] Portraits of this kind were becoming more widespread but it was by no means commonplace. It is likely therefore that Irving sat for this photograph to provide a visual memory for his parents before he left London or perhaps to mark his eighteenth birthday, in February 1856. In this photo Irving presents as a smart, respectable young man and the finish of the clothing suggests it was newly purchased – perhaps with the inheritance money he had recently received. In this image Irving demonstrated his knowledge of the latest fashions. His black frock coat was usual daywear for gentlemen, but the large lapels were new for the 1850s, as were the turned-down collars of his dress shirt. The fashion for turned-down collars meant that cravats had to be made narrower and therefore became ties, which is evident in this photograph of Irving. The double-breasted waistcoat was also fashionable in the 1850s, made with a rich striped fabric (but not embroidered, which after 1855 was considered flashy). Irving's hair is fashionably parted to one side, oiled down and curled on to his face, a style influenced by Prince Albert.[651]

In contrast, Irving's appearance in a photograph taken fifteen years later in the early 1870s (figure 6, page 309) illustrates how much his self-presentation had changed. This was not just the result of changing fashions. Indeed there were only minor changes to the cut of men's clothes over these years. The 1860s saw the introduction of the sack-coat, which reached just to the hips and was fastened by three buttons with only the top one done up, usually accompanied by check trousers, although this did not replace the continued popularity of the three-quarter-length frock coat. By the 1870s the three-piece of coat, waistcoat, and trousers made of wool or linen was standard. Black and dark muted shades had started to dominate the male wardrobe by this time, including trousers and waistcoat. Shirt collars varied in shape and height, and could be either stiff and upright or softly turned down. There were options with neckwear also: the tie could be either knotted and held in place by a pin, or tied in a bow. Individuality was

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[650] Roger Hargreaves, 'Putting Faces to the Names: Social and Celebrity Portrait Photography', in *The Beautiful and the Damned: The Creation of Identity in Nineteenth Century Photography*, ed. Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2001), 17–55.

[651] On men's fashion in the mid-Victorian period see Cynthia Cooper, 'The Victorian and Edwardian Eras: 1860-1910', in *The Fashion Reader*, ed. Abby Lillethun and Linda Welters (Oxford: Berg, 2007); Lucy Johnston, *Nineteenth-Century Fashion in Detail* (London: V&A, 2005); Diana De Marly, *Fashion for Men: An Illustrated History* (London: Batsford, 1985); J. Anderson Black, *A History of Fashion.*, 2nd rev edn (London: Orbis Publishing, 1980); Phillis Cunnington, *Costume in Pictures* (London: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1964).

demonstrated in the cut, details and quality of fabric. Accessories such as canes, pins and gloves also enabled an element of individuality, as did hair, particularly facial hair.

This standard gentlemanly mode of dressing was not how Irving presented in this photograph. In her study on artistic dress in Victorian Britain fashion historian Robyne Calvert suggests that there was no identifiable male bohemian style *per se* but rather a bohemian 'sensibility' which was characterized by what she termed 'sartorial disregard'.[652] Bohemian men operated within sartorial norms, at least in the mid-Victorians years, but what distinguished them was the air of the slightly unkempt, baggy-clothed, comfortable, 'devil-may-care' artist familiar from self-portraits dating back to Rembrandt. The floppy bow-tie in particular was associated with artistic dress. This was precisely how the notorious Pre-Raphaelite artists of the 1850s dressed (see, for example, figure 7 of John Everett Millais in 1857, page 310), and Calvert argues that this group were largely responsible for setting the tone of artistic identity in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In figure 6, Irving presents himself with this 'sartorial disregard'. Although the date of this photograph is unknown, it was probably taken in the late 1860s or early 1870s. This is one of a small number of cartes-de-visite portraits of Irving taken at a time when celebrity photographic portraits were becoming increasingly popular.[653] In this photograph Irving has rejected the formal dark frock coat of the previous photo in favour of a less formal woollen hip-length loose-fitting sack-coat with matching crumpled waistcoat and light checked trousers. The collar on his shirt is meant to be stiff and upright and yet it appears limp and soft, unbuttoned at the top and revealing more of the skin of his neck than it should. His necktie is loosely tied in a floppy bow, adding to the artistic nature of his appearance. Irving here is clean-shaven, which was unusual for the time and certainly indicated difference, and his long black unkempt wavy hair distinctively curls out in a fly-away manner from his ears. Spectacles casually hanging

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[652] Robyne Calvert, 'Fashioning the Artist: Artistic Dress in Victorian Britain, 1848-1900' (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2012). Whistler was another artist notorious for the way he dressed in the 1860s, see Margaret F. MacDonald, 'Whistler: Painting the Man', in Whistler, Women, and Fashion, ed. Margaret F. MacDonald, Susan Galassi, and Aileen Ribiero (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003), 2–15.

[653] John Plunkett, 'Celebrity and Community: The Poetics of the Carte-de-Visite', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 8, no. 1 (1 January 2003): 55–79; Hargreaves, 'Putting Faces'.

down at the top of his waistcoat suggest an unstudied attitude. Irving has an air of the slightly unkempt bohemian here, prioritizing comfort over formality in the way he wears his clothing. And yet he has not stepped outside of male sartorial boundaries. As design historian Helen Walter has demonstrated, Henry Irving was aware of the implications of his public images, and attempted to exert control over their creation and dissemination.[654] This photograph was carefully constructed in its details to portray and underscore Irving's bohemian identity to the Victorian public.

The contrast between Irving's appearance in the photograph of c. 1856 with that of his patron J.L. Toole in a portrait photograph taken around the same time (figure 8, page 311) demonstrates how different their styles of dress were at this point in their lives. Toole had been on the stage since 1852, and presents as a bohemian gentleman, dressed in black frock coat, black waistcoat and white shirt with a stiff upright collar and large tie. There is certainly an air of 'sartorial disregard' in the way Toole wears his clothes: the floppy bow tie is reminiscent of Millais' tie in figure 7 and his crumpled coat and fly-away curly hair are suggestive of the unkempt artistic look. The velvet of his frock with its leather lapels and the watch-chain around his waist signal his individuality. Irving and Toole met around the time that this photograph was taken, and as a successful and urbane young actor Toole would certainly have provided a sartorial role model for Irving. Whether Irving was able to make any immediate changes to his appearance is questionable because, unlike Toole, Irving was perpetually short of money in the early years of his career and might well have found it challenging to purchase new clothes.

'Sartorial disregard' certainly did not describe the public mode of dressing of Irving's other patron, Charles J. Mathews. He presented himself as a polished gentleman and was more of a dandy, precise and fashionable in the details of his appearance. Figure 9 (page 312) is a photographic portrait of Mathews in the 1860s when Irving first met him. He appears in formal wear of smart black frock coat, black trousers, white shirt with stiff high collar and dark carefully folded tie. Individuality in the form of details and accessories is subtle – no patterned waistcoat or trousers, just an eye-glass and signet

[654] Helen Walter, 'Artist, Professional, Gentleman: Designing the Body of the Actor-Manager, 1870-1900' (PhD thesis, Royal College of Art, 2015). See also Julie F. Codell, The Victorian Artist: Artists' Lifewritings in Britain, 1870-1910 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

ring, and velvet lapels on his coat. It is hardly surprising that Mathews presented in this formal way publicly because he was part of an older generation of gentlemen actors. He was a well-groomed 'town swell' of the 'old brigade' according to the actor John Coleman (1831 - 1904), who recalled Mathews' precise appearance with 'his tall hat curled up at the brim… his frock-coat fitting like his skin; his wrist bands turned over his cuffs, and his pink coral links; his primrose kids, his gaiter-bottomed trousers, and his patent-leather boots.'[655]

Although there was little sign of the bohemian in Mathews' public sartorial appearance, in private at home his bohemianism was clearly apparent to his guests. In his memoirs Clement Scott describes Mathews as 'a model but most original host. It was his custom to sit down to dinner and take the head of the table in his dressing gown, smoking cap and slippers.'[656] His appearance must have been somewhat similar to the photographic portrait of Mathews as Dazzle in *London Assurance* (1858) in figure 10 (page 313). Calvert argues that by the 1880s some men chose to express their artistic identity by wearing this informal attire in public, but in the 1860s dressing gowns and smoking caps were usually only worn at home during the day.[657] Gentlemen dressed in formal attire for dinner, and Mathews' transgression from this was noteworthy enough for Scott to make comment. The bohemianism that Mathews displayed in this setting represented, to use Calvert's words, 'not just a style, but a philosophical attitude' and demonstrated a sense of 'freedom to wear more casual, comfortable items in the company of like-minded friends and acquaintances.'[658] This philosophical attitude made Mathews an eccentric and Irving witnessed him pushing the boundaries of respectability. He was known for his languid, gentlemanly ease, a cool panache, self-possession and fun-loving humour, and he epitomised everything that Irving was not in the 1860s. Mathews therefore allowed Irving the opportunity to closely observe a thorough gentleman, and to imbibe his bohemianism.

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[655] John Coleman, *Fifty Years of an Actor's Life* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1904), 212.

[656] Scott, *The Drama*, II:10.

[657] Calvert, 'Fashioning'.

[658] Ibid., 72.

Although Irving produced and disseminated images carefully constructed to suggest his bohemianism, it was a long time before his bohemian identity was convincing in person. When Ellen Terry met Irving in London in 1867 she likened him to the character Werther in the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. First published in 1774, the novel was an international success, and influenced the later Romantic literary movement. Werther is the archetypal romantic figure: an impassioned young artist with a sensitive temperament who becomes embroiled in a romantic situation that turns tragic and leads to his suicide. Werther was a familiar character to readers throughout the Victorian years, in part because the towering Victorian writer Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) parodied Werther in his novel *Sartor Resartus* (1836). By making this comparison, Terry was intimating that Irving was attempting the studied melancholic pose of a romantic bohemian artist. She suggested that his efforts to distinguish himself in acting fell short of the mark and led to Irving 'suffering deeply through his inability to express himself through his art'. At this stage Irving was neither a convincing bohemian nor a convincing gentleman, and Terry succinctly summed this up in her comical description of him: 'There was a touch of exaggeration in his appearance – a dash of Werther, with a few flourishes of Jingle!'[659] Despite being sensitive to ridicule, Irving was attracting it.

By 1878 however, ten years after Terry first met him, Irving *was* a convincing bohemian gentleman. In fact he was known as the archetypal bohemian gentleman. Arguably Irving's moment of arrival was when he appeared in the popular series 'Celebrities at Home' in the journal *The World* on 20 September 1876. *The World* was a weekly magazine first published in London in July 1874. Aimed at a polite readership, the editor and founder Edmund Yates declared it to be a new kind of quality publication for educated people in its draft prospectus; the price of sixpence was relatively expensive for a weekly journal and signalled its intended exclusive audience.[660] It quickly became a very popular journal, and the column 'Celebrities at Home' contributed to this success. Tennyson had been the first 'celebrity' to feature in the series; Irving was number five, sandwiched between pen-portraits of the politician William Gladstone and the Prime

[659] Terry, *Story*, 94.

[660] Edmund Yates, *Edmund Yates: His Recollections and Experiences* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1885).

Minister Benjamin Disraeli. In his portrait Irving is named as 'one of the best known men in London' and his appearance is described in bohemian terms:

> As he jerks along the street with league-devouring stride, his long dark hair hanging over this shoulders, his look dreamy and absent, his cheeks wan and thin, the slovenly air with which his clothes are worn in contrast to their fashionable cut, people turn to stare after him, and tell each other who he is.[661]

In this passage Yates notes the artistic aspects of Irving's presentation. He had unusually long hair which hung over his shoulders, and a 'dreamy and absent' look – familiar tropes of the romantic artist. The length of Irving's hair was sufficiently unusual to be the cause of comment and mirth and was one of the signs that denoted him in contemporary cartoons. Actor Seymour Hicks recalled an incident, likely to have been in the 1890s, at Boxhill station when some youths mocked Irving by singing the popular song 'Get Your Hair Cut!'[662] The description of Irving's clothes in 'Celebrities at Home' also fits with the notion of bohemian 'sartorial disregard': he wears his clothes with a 'slovenly air', appearing rather unkempt and dishevelled despite adhering to the latest men's fashion. Irving is depicted as demonstrating his individuality despite not stepping out of male sartorial boundaries.

Chapter one discussed how representations of bohemia in the mid-Victorian years were characterised by youthful rebellion, playfulness, sociability, poverty and fraternity. By the late nineteenth century this sentimental bohemia had undergone a further level of filtering as those who had been young men in the mid-Victorian era started to reminisce about bohemia in the 'good old days'. In these accounts the genuine, authentic bohemian increasingly became a narrative concern, providing a mechanism to assert social distinctions between the polite and the vulgar. Irving aligned himself with the 'authentic' bohemians of the 'old brigade' as depicted in the memoirs of some of his contemporaries. Typical of this literature was Edmund Yates's *Recollections and Experiences*, in which he nostalgically looked back on the London of his youth. For Yates the young men of 'our British Bohemia' were 'young, gifted, and reckless… they

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[661] Edmund Yates, ed., 'Mr Henry Irving in Bond Street', in *Celebrities at Home*, 1st series (London: Office of 'The World', 1878).

[662] Hicks, *Between Ourselves*, 125.

worked only by fits and starts, and never except under the pressure of necessity… they were sometimes at the height of happiness, sometimes in the depths of despair'.[663] Yates was one of many voices contributing to and constructing a group identity and collective narrative about the lives of bohemians in the mid-Victorian years.[664] Theatre historian Jacky Bratton suggests reading these accounts not for factual details that can be corroborated elsewhere but rather as evidence of individuals' attempts to authenticate their membership of a group, in this case the acting community.[665] These sources contributed to the enduring myth of bohemia: social unconventionality to a certain degree was acceptable, and poverty, debt and other indiscretions were put down to a youthful phase in life in which individuals almost naïvely pursued their art. But what was strikingly absent about these sources – and indeed most auto/biographies written in the nineteenth century – was any significant discussion of the private, domestic or sexual lives of men. Wives and families, if mentioned, were done briefly in passing, and scandal was never discussed.

This construction of the mid-Victorian bohemian allowed Irving to repackage in a romantic light the events of his earlier life that were disgraceful by polite Victorian standards. One aspect of his earlier life that Irving reframed in bohemian terms for late Victorian audiences was his struggle with debt. Stories Irving told of his early acting days were often characterised by his struggle against poverty. On one occasion Irving recalled the lengths that his friend Toole had gone to in assisting him in his youth:

> When I was a poor, struggling actor, tramping from town to town in search of engagements, and meeting only with scornful rebuffs and bitter disappointments, and, indeed, in terrible straits to earn my bread, Mr Toole found me, befriended me, gave me work, rescued me from want, and inspired me with hope and courage, and never left me till he saw me well on the road to something like prosperity – and, I may say, something very much like honour.[666]

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[663] Yates, *Recollections*, 299–300.

[664] Examples of nostalgic late-nineteenth century auto/biographical accounts of mid-Victorian theatrical bohemia include Clement Scott, *Thirty Years at the Play, and Dramatic Table Talk*. (London: Railway and General Automatic Library, 1892); John Hollingshead, *Footlights* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1883); Scott, T*he Drama*; Hatton, *Reminiscences*.

[665] J.S. Bratton, 'Anecdote and Mimicry as History', in *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 95–132.

[666] Newton, *Cues*, 51–52.

Irving's self-presentation here, in an anecdote recounted in the late nineteenth century, was strategic. Irving did not mention his bankruptcy and the language he used presented him in a positive light. Like many other nostalgic accounts appearing at this time Irving depicted an imagined version of the bye-gone days of the mid-Victorian bohemian world, portraying himself in the romanticised language of the struggling artist who persevered against all the odds. His use of the words 'hope', 'courage' and 'honour' suggested a moral effort on Irving's part in his fight for survival. He also presented his friendship with Toole as honourable in the sense that he provided Irving with the tools to help himself – food, work and encouragement. The narrative of self-making and independence is maintained here: Irving only needed a little to help to get on the right track, which he accepted from his friend, and indeed there was honour in doing so. This account demonstrates once again the mismatch between the reality and the fantasy of Irving's later story. In fact Irving's destitution was so severe and his debts so crippling, that he might have dropped out of the profession altogether in 1866. His subsequent success was therefore dependent to a large extent on his patrons.

Another example of Irving's bohemian poverty is indicated in a speech he delivered at the Savage Club Annual Dinner in 1895. Recalling his time as a youthful member of the club in the days of the 'real' bohemia, Irving said:

> Those were the days when we cultivated literature and drama on a chop and a tankard, and came out of Covent Garden at the witching hour when the vegetables were coming in… Time was when the literary savage was radiant if he made a guinea by translating a play – or by chance writing one… But now guineas are so plentiful that he can spend one of them, without missing it.[667]

This speech demonstrates Irving's deliberate positioning of himself as one of the authentic bohemians of the mid-Victorian years. Irving idealised bohemianism as 'the most enchanting state of human existence', and he depicted it in this passage as a bye-gone way of living, a golden age, very different from how younger actors understood bohemianism at the end of the nineteenth century. Poverty was an accepted – even

[667] Quoted in Jeffrey Richards, *Sir Henry Irving: A Victorian Actor and His World* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005), 288–89.

celebrated – element of authentic bohemianism in the mid-Victorian years, when discussion of the arts with simple food and drink, 'a chop and a tankard', was enough for impoverished 'old stagers' like Irving. Like other men from the older generation in the arts world Irving aligned himself with the fictional sentimental bohemia in which there was an inherent integrity both in the pursuit of art and in the bonds of friendship and loyalty that tied its members together. In this speech, transcribed in full in the press, Irving underscored the idea that he had once been that carefree bohemian figure in his youth. But like so many others, Irving had returned to his bourgeois life when he reached a certain age: he had 'grown into that form of external respectability which comes with larger responsibilities and grey hairs'. Mid-Victorian representations of this moment of transition out of bohemia suggested that this time came with marriage. Irving married in 1869, and only became a member of the Savage Club in 1871 shortly before his marriage finally broke down completely.[668] He made use of the romantic bohemian narrative to suggest that there was no shame in poverty and debt, but this was far from his own experience. In this way he attempted to position his past as beyond reproach.

Irving needed to reframe another scandalous aspect of his earlier life: the breakdown of his marriage. This was certainly the subject of gossip and always had the potential to cause Irving embarrassment as a figurehead in Victorian society. He had effectively abandoned the family home, leaving his wife to bring up his two infant children alone, and in so doing had failed to meet up to middle-class expectations of masculinity. Their married life, from the evidence of their correspondence, was full of anger and resentment. Florence had been a good social match for Irving at a time when he was still acculturating in polite society and his status as a gentleman was not yet secure. By 1872, just three years after they were married, when Irving was well on his way to social and professional success, he left Florence with their three-month old baby and two-year old son. Irving's actions robbed Florence of her role as a homemaker and wife at a time when this was an essential aspect of middle-class feminine status, and suggests a degree of ruthlessness in him. One particular account of the moment of their marriage breakdown appears in the journal *Fortnightly* in 1938:

[668] Ibid., 286.

> With a crony or cronies, [Irving] would talk till dawn, and after, on the theatre and all thereunto appertaining: and when his club closed it was nothing for him to call a cab and take them home with him for further whisky, talk, and cigars. Mr Lionel Brough once told me that it was on one of these occasions that Irving and his wife parted. He had taken Mr Brough back with him at three in the morning; Mrs Irving came to the top of the stairs and protested, until Irving at last quietly retired, packed a bag, and left the house, never to see his wife again, and apparently never again even to mention her name.[669]

The actor Lionel Brough (1836-1909) was a close associate of Irving, and although I have not been able to verify this account, it is not implausible given Florence's growing distaste for Irving's profession and his colleagues. Evidence for this distaste is hinted at in July 1871 when Irving wrote to Florence to inform her of the death of the actor Frank Matthews, who lived next door to the couple on Linden Grove. Irving requested that his wife visit Mrs Matthews to offer her sympathy, adding 'with a loss like hers, all feud should cease'.[670] Florence had clearly fallen out with her neighbours.

Other evidence points to the tension that Irving's occupation caused. Laura Hain Myall described the icy interaction between husband and wife at a dinner party at her father's house after the successful first night of *The Bells* on 25 November 1871. This was widely acknowledged in the press to be the breakthrough performance of Irving's career. Florence's lack of support and unease in Irving's company were palpably noticeable to Myall.[671] Another account claimed that Florence had said to Irving 'Are you going on making a fool of yourself all your life?'[672] Florence was becoming a threat to Irving's existence and his status. Irving calculated that he had more to gain from keeping his friends than his wife, which indicates not only his ambition but also the importance he placed on his network for his own security: Irving had nothing to fall back on outside of acting, and his world was entirely centred in this bohemian community. This denouement exposes the precariousness of Irving's existence at that point in his life: even though he had married above himself, Florence alone could not secure his foothold as a gentleman.

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[669] H.M. Walbrook, 'Henry Irving', *Fortnightly*, February 1938.

[670] Henry Irving, 'To Florence Irving', 27 July 1871, 37/7/7, THM.

[671] Friswell, afterwards Myall, *In the Sixties*, 150.

[672] Laurence Irving, *Henry Irving: The Actor and His World* (London: Faber, 1951), 200.

Given Irving's fame it is not surprising that he never divorced Florence. Press reporting of cases coming before the new Divorce Court after 1857 meant certain public humiliation for him if the details of his finances and rumours of earlier sexual misconduct were opened to scrutiny.[673] Instead Irving's strategy, like so many other elements of his past, was to maintain strategic silences and to never speak of his marriage publicly. In this matter Irving had the advantage of Victorian conventions of secrecy. According to historian Albert D. Pionke, 'secrecy that could be located within the private sphere and attributed to individuals met with greater approbation than secrecy deemed public and associated with non-familial collectives'.[674] In Brereton's 1883 biography of Irving, there was no mention of his marital status at all, and in this way Irving also benefited from the cultural conventions of biography, which focused on men's professional achievements and rarely, if at all, mentioned private, domestic life.

From the mid-1870s, as his reputation grew, Irving allowed an alternative idea to circulate in the press that he was a bachelor. His entry in the series 'Celebrities at Home' in 1876 was only the first of many 'At Home' interviews representing him as a single man:

> The localities which are generally recognised as particularly 'eligible' for being let in chambers or apartments, are seldom affected by the sons of Thespis. There are, however, exceptions to this rule; and the gentleman who, above all others in the present day, evokes the applause of the British playgoer has pitched his tent… within cry of the St James's-street clubs. Yet is his dwelling wholly different from the ordinary 'rooms' or 'chambers' tenanted by the wealthy wifeless which abound in the vicinity.[675]

The use of the terms 'eligible' and 'wealthy wifeless', and the geographical description of London's club land, suggest Irving's unmarried status even if not explicitly stating it. We know that Irving read this article before it was published, and therefore colluded in this representation, knowing it was false. The exclusion of any mention at all of his wife and children from the 1883 biography served to reinforce this idea. In this way Irving used another tactic to deflect attention from his private life.

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[673] Hammerton, *Cruelty*, chapter 4.

[674] Albert D Pionke and Denise Tischler Millstein, eds., *Victorian Secrecy: Economies of Knowledge and Concealment* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 10.

[675] Yates, 'Henry Irving', 60–61.

But there is another reason perhaps why Irving chose to leave out any mention of his domestic life in the 1883 biography: rumours of a sexual affair with Ellen Terry had been circulating in polite circles for many years. Given Irving had abandoned his wife and had not divorced, and Ellen Terry had separated but not divorced her husband, this was scandalous by polite cultural standards. During the summer of 1883 Prime Minister Gladstone had offered Irving a knighthood but had been vetoed by members of the Cabinet; they objected to the fact Irving had left his wife and the rumours of his relationship with Terry.[676] It is possible that Irving wanted the 1883 biography to function in part to detract from those rumours, bringing them into doubt, by countering them with a wholesome narrative about him. By focusing the biography entirely on his professional life, providing minimal biographical information and positioning himself as a hard-working and moral self-made artistic genius, Irving could control – at least in part – the information circulating about him in the public domain. The strong narratives of self-making, eccentricity and bohemianism therefore worked to counter not only his shadowy past but also his morally questionable present.

Conclusion

This chapter has pulled together the central claims of this thesis by looking closely at Irving's experiences in London in the late 1860s and early 1870s. One of these claims is that the Victorians interpreted status through the individual's bodily practices and behaviour during social interaction. In this chapter I have provided evidence from autobiographical accounts which demonstrate how Irving's contemporaries interpreted his social status during their social interactions with him. Using words familiar to readers as suggestive of social differences in their description of him, Irving's friends signalled his transition from vulgar to polite.

I have also argued in this thesis that upward social mobility between the vulgar and the polite was dependent on a long process of acculturation in polite society. This

[676] Michael Holroyd, *A Strange Eventful History: The Dramatic Lives of Ellen Terry, Henry Irving and Their Remarkable Families* (London: Vintage, 2009), 258–59. I have been unable to verify this account.

chapter has provided evidence of this process of acculturation for Irving over many years, extending from his early manhood into his thirties. I have provided examples of experiences Irving had in polite society and shown evidence of his process of learning. I have argued for the importance of patronage and social networks in the process of social mobility and for accessing opportunities. This chapter has shown how Irving's patrons actively brought him into their social circles, enabling him to expand his personal network and therefore to access more of these social and professional opportunities.

During this study I have considered the effects of different cultural contexts on the individual's experience, sense of self and identity, and the ways in which they might have conditioned bodily practices and behaviour. I have argued that Irving's experiences in different contexts during his childhood and youth were crucial for enabling his social movement to happen. These early experiences, in which Irving was constantly exposed to new environments and people, had an impact on his personality: they provided him with a degree of resilience, independence and flexibility. This served him well in the context of the bohemian world of Victorian theatre, in which he was able to construct his identity anew. Through photographs of Irving and his contemporaries I have demonstrated the change in self-presentation Irving underwent during his early career.

Another assertion I have made in this thesis is that a close look at the experiences of one individual can provide fresh perspectives on cultures of class in the Victorian period. In polite culture, the perceived threat of social climbing led to the narrative concern about authentic and fraudulent identity. I have shown how Irving's polite contemporaries policed the boundaries of their group by publicly questioning his authenticity as a gentleman. Throughout the thesis I have provided evidence of the criticisms Irving received about his social background and education. This chapter has argued that this policing went yet further for socially mobile men, who were held accountable to ideals of polite culture more stridently than gentlemen by birth. I have shown that Irving's struggles with debt and his marriage breakdown contravened polite masculine ideals, which had potentially damaging consequences for his reputation and standing in society.

Throughout this study I have argued that Irving's status as a gentleman was always under scrutiny because of his social background. Irving managed his public identity carefully in order to combat this major weakness, primarily by constructing a particular story about his life through the medium of biography. In particular, Irving harnessed the Victorian liberal idea of self-making, an idea he had been familiar with since childhood, for his benefit. This chapter has demonstrated how Irving publicly managed his other weaknesses – potential attacks about his finances and marriage breakdown – by styling himself as an eccentric genius and an authentic bohemian. I have shown how Irving harnessed the positive connotations of these two ideas not only through his biography, but also through his self-presentation and the stories he told about himself in the media. In these ways Irving provided another line of defence for his status as a gentleman.

Conclusion

> Apart from his genuine kindness, and his grace and magnetism, it was this sense that he was always playing a part – that he preserved always, for almost every one, a certain barrier of mystery – that made Irving so fascinating a figure.[677]

In his obituary on Irving in 1905 the author Max Beerbohm (1872-1956) presented the ambiguity at the heart of Henry Irving: he appeared to be both authentic and fraudulent. Whilst acknowledging what he perceived as 'genuine kindness' Beerbohm also felt Irving was 'always playing a part'. Irving's achievements were remarkable for any individual: he became the unofficial head of the Victorian stage, and was the first actor to receive a knighthood. But these achievements were even more extraordinary for someone who started his working life as the real-life equivalent of the impoverished lower middle-class clerk Bob Cratchit in Dickens's celebrated novella *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and reached such a pinnacle that he was dining with royalty.

Throughout this thesis my argument has been that the circumstances of Irving's childhood and youth shaped his personality, and had an impact on his later experiences and what he was able to achieve. The Victorians explained Irving's success by claiming that he had exceptional natural abilities. And indeed it is possible that he *was* exceptional. But without seeing and experiencing Irving in person, it is difficult to weigh up how 'magnetic' he was, for example – or indeed whether our current understanding or sense of a magnetic personality is the same as it was for the Victorians. How much of that epithet can we in any case attribute to the narrative he succeeded in establishing about himself? This study, with its focus on the significance of the movement of the body and the sound of the voice, would certainly benefit from having film footage and sound recordings of Irving and his contemporaries.[678] I want, therefore, to conclude this thesis

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[677] Max Beerbohm, *Around Theatres*, vol. II. (London: William Heinemann, 1924), 180.

[678] Some very short poor quality recordings of Irving reciting passages from Shakespeare into early versions of the phonograph from 1888 onwards have recently come to light, but their value for this study is limited. Michael Kilgarriff, 'Henry Irving and the Phonograph: Bennett Maxwell', *The Irving Society*, n.d., [http://www.theirvingsociety.org.uk/the-voice-of-henry-irving/ accessed 4 May 2017]. For histories focusing on sound and smell in the Victorian period see for example, Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: The*

with a brief consideration of the limits of what we can know about people in the past, and what this means for the biographical case study as a robust methodology.

My focus on the individual has demonstrated the difficulties inherent in establishing who the 'real' person was. Beerbohm's observation that there was 'a sense that he was always playing a part – that he preserved always, for almost every one, a certain barrier of mystery' is borne out in the written and visual records Irving produced.[679] Irving presented a kaleidoscope of faces to the public, and as historian Matt Houlbrook suggests, 'the moment we embark on the task of finding the "real" individual, we are doomed to failure'.[680] Throughout the years I have spent researching Henry Irving I have rarely been able to feel empathy for him, despite his underdog status. I have questioned his motives, wondering how much he was 'playing a part' (even in his seemingly close friendships) in order to achieve his ambitions; I can't be sure that Irving was a decent man. But at other times I have seen glimpses of his insecurities, and have witnessed his struggle to push back against social prejudice, succeeding against the odds. Surely this deserves respect. The available evidence has not provided a clear picture of Irving's character, but I have come to embrace his opacity. Instead, I have attempted to persuade the reader of the value of looking at the different conditions and contexts of his life to suggest how they might have had an impact on his identity and sense of self. I have suggested a layering of multiple identities over time, the work they did for Irving, and the cultures of class that prompted him to present himself in such ways. But I am conscious that I have necessarily had to shape his records into 'some kind of life-story' to seek explanations for his social mobility, and fully acknowledge the many gaps in Irving's archives and the limitations of the sources available to provide definitive answers.[681] In this sense my study embraces, in Houlbrook's words, 'a way of writing history that is

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Victorian Fight Against Filth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens' London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012).

[679] On the ways in which Irving presented different faces to the public through his visual records in the late nineteenth century see Helen Walter, 'Artist, Professional, Gentleman: Designing the Body of the Actor-Manager, 1870-1900' (PhD thesis, Royal College of Art, 2015).

[680] Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 15.

[681] Carolyn Steedman, 'On Not Writing Biography', *New Formations*, no. 67 (22 June 2009): 15.

readier to admit its limits, more open-ended in its conclusions, deliberately less confident.'[682]

A real strength of the biographical case study is that it can enable the historian to observe the impact on the individual of changes in structures, practices and ideas over time. Self-making, for example, was complex and shifted constantly with economic and social change, and over time distinct constituencies deployed the rhetoric of self-making for their different political agendas. In the 1850s self-making was an important strand of the mid-Victorian liberal credo, and helped in the political arguments advocating the move from a focus on legislation as a passive agent of social change, towards individual responsibility. Thirty years later in the 1880s, theories emerging from France and Germany arguing for human essentialism and the socio-biological degeneration of society cast doubt on the idea of whether self-improvement was even possible.[683] The move towards mass democracy and the desirability of socialism became even more worrying with this new intellectual backdrop. Paradoxically they provided some Victorian thinkers with a renewed rationale for classical liberalism in Britain. Although we do not know to what extent Irving himself was aware of these specific ideas, his 1883 biography worked to distance him from the vulgar 'masses' and to focus on the individualism of self-making. As I have also argued, although Victorians lauded self-making in theory, the socially mobile man could never escape the association with fraudulence. Irving constantly had to negotiate these changing and complex meanings, playing down certain aspects of himself whilst harnessing the positive connotations of self-making.

Similarly, the meanings of bohemianism were complex and shifting over the course of Irving's life. During the 1860s when Irving was constructing his artistic identity and self-presentation, bohemianism had largely positive romantic connotations, and allowed for a degree of social diversity and moral laxity. These ideas were reinforced with renewed vigour in the 1880s as a wave of autobiographies and accounts of old bohemian London were published. But by the 1890s, art and artists came to be linked to social degeneration. The German writer Max Nordau, whose book *Degeneration* was translated

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[682] Houlbrook, *Tricksters*, 16.

[683] Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, 1848-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 153–221.

into English in 1895, used scientific language to condemn what he regarded as the decadence of the cultural products and lifestyles of the artistic elite, shifting the focus from the poor to bohemians.[684] My research has considered how Irving navigated this shifting and complex field of meanings, harnessing and contributing to the positive connotations of the artistic bohemian in order to protect his public status as a respectable gentleman.

The biographical case study provides a way to test previously established historical frameworks, challenging as Joan Scott has argued 'the orthodox categories of current historiography: surprising them, throwing them off their guard'.[685] Historians, for example, have often interpreted wider socio-cultural shifts over the nineteenth century, such as the expansion of transport networks and changes to the education system, as positive developments towards the democratization of British society and the opening up of opportunities to a wider group. But some of the impediments to social mobility in the mid-Victorian period that this study has indicated were still there at the end of Irving's life. In 1905, the year of Irving's death, the novelist H.G. Wells highlighted the ongoing material and cultural barriers to polite society in his novel *Kipps*, revealing the continued importance of patrons, networks, wealth, type of education, bodily comportment and ways of speaking for social mobility.[686] This suggests that we need to reassess when and to what extent opportunities became genuinely more open to everyone. My argument here is that biographical case studies help us to disinter (if not fully unravel) the complexities, challenges and unevenness of such mobility. These complexities and challenges can be more oblique in macro-level socio-economic analysis. What I hope I have demonstrated in this thesis is the value in moving between the particular and the general, and that setting up a meticulous dialogue between the micro- and macro-level brings us to a more nuanced understanding of historical structures, practices and ideas.

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[684] Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: Heinemann, 1895).

[685] Joan W. Scott, 'Storytelling', *History and Theory* 50, no. 2 (1 May 2011): 205.

[686] H. G Wells, *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1905).

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Figure 1

'Irving as Hamlet' (part 1), cartoon, publication unknown (n.d.).
No. 40. *Percy H. Fitzgerald Archive of Newspaper Cuttings*, Garrick Club Collection, London.

The publication and date of this press cutting (and figure 2) are unknown. It is unlikely that it was published before 1874 when Irving first played Hamlet for 200 nights at the Lyceum Theatre. A possible date is 1879 when Irving played Hamlet again for one hundred nights. His father Samuel Brodribb died in 1876.

Figure 2

'Irving as Hamlet' (part 2), cartoon, publication unknown (n.d.).
No. 40. *Percy H. Fitzgerald Archive of Newspaper Cuttings*, Garrick Club Collection, London.

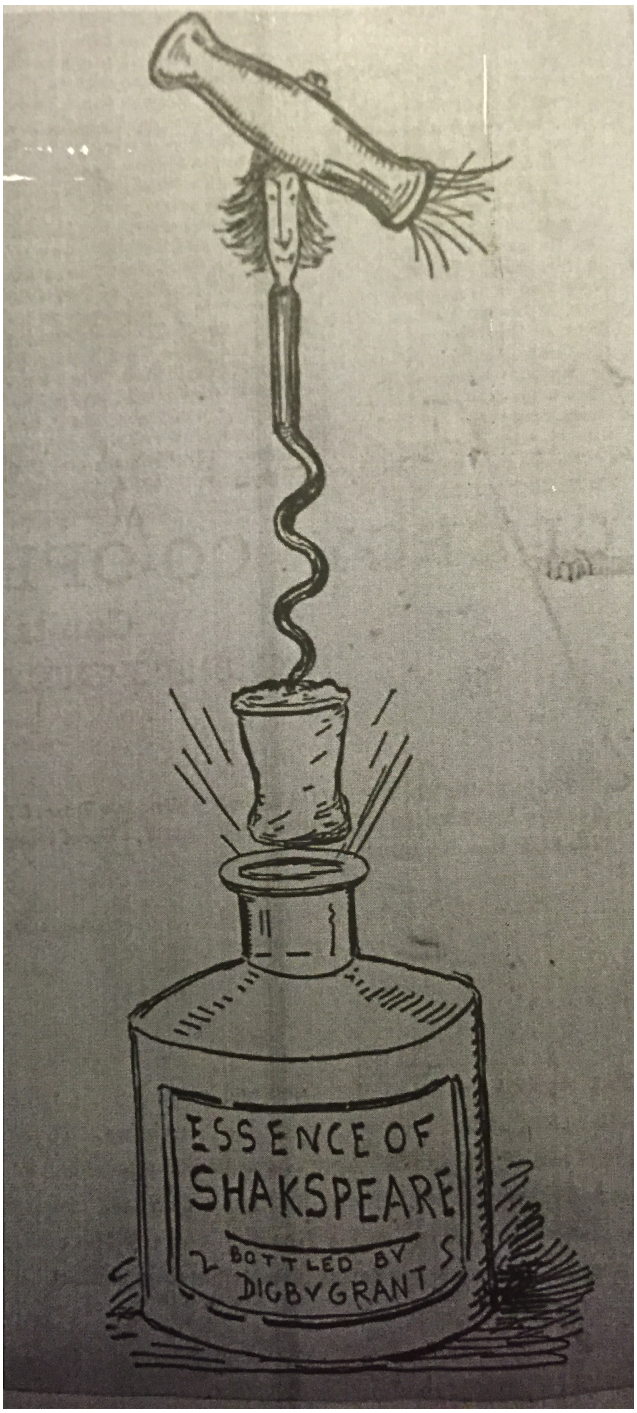

Figure 3

'Essence of Shakspeare, Bottle by Digby Grant', cartoon, publication unknown (n.d.). No. 53. *Percy H. Fitzgerald Archive of Newspaper Cuttings*, Garrick Club Collection, London.

Irving played the character of Digby Grant in *The Two Roses* in 1870. This cartoon is likely to date from the late 1870s when Irving was actor-manager at the Lyceum Theatre.

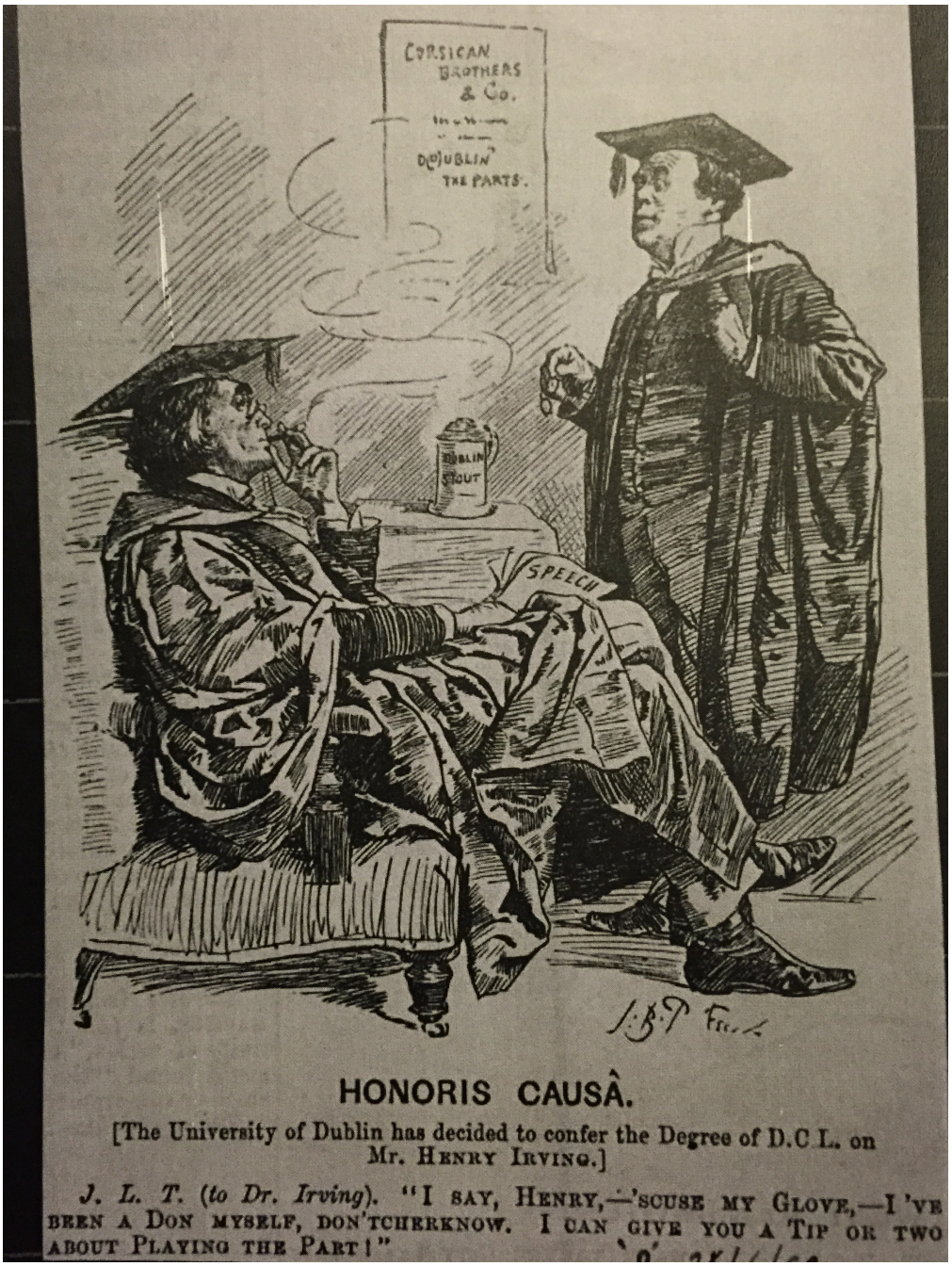

Figure 4

'Honoris Causa', cartoon, *Punch,* 25 June 1892.

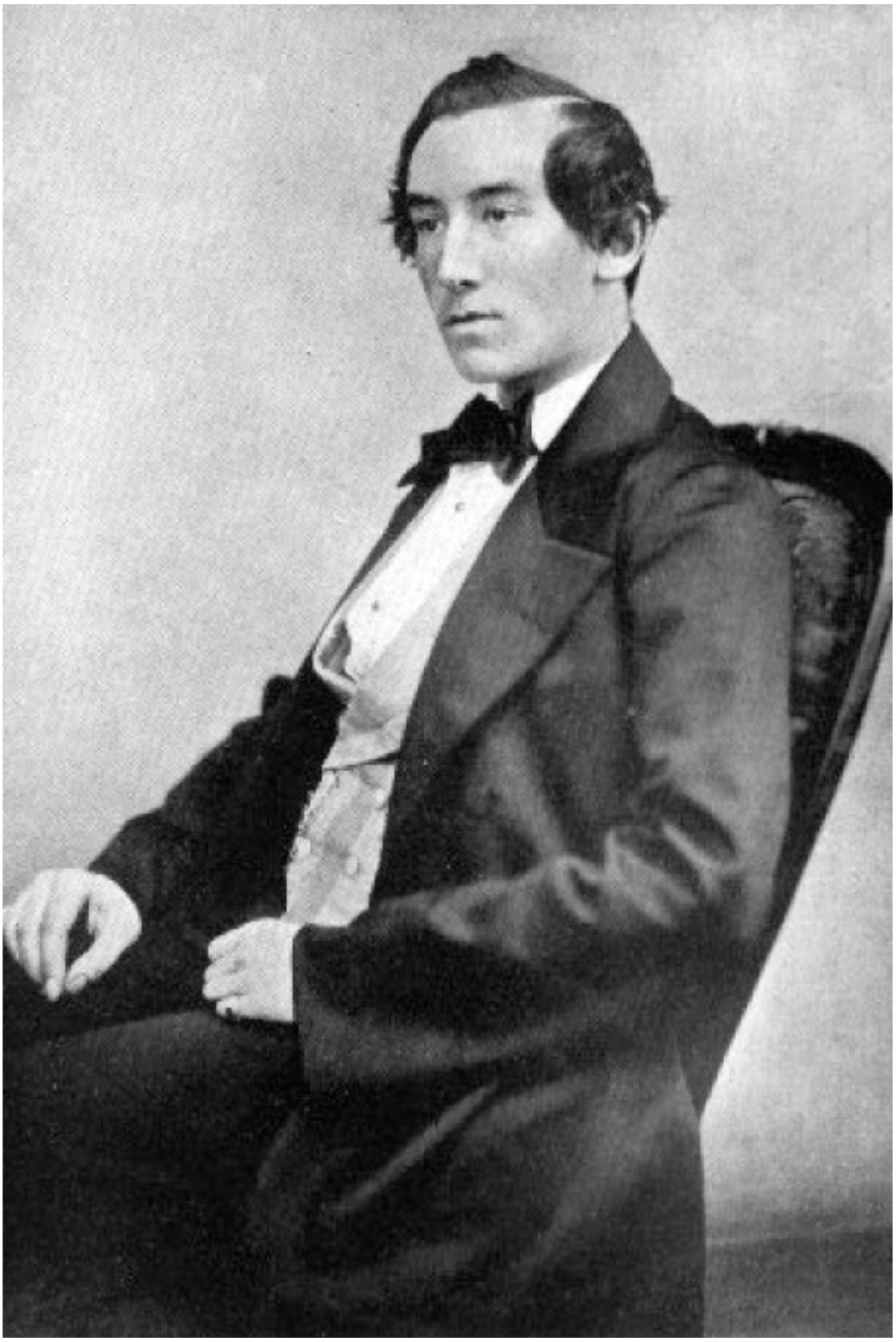

Figure 5

'Henry Irving', photograph (c.1856), reprinted in Laurence Irving, *Henry Irving: The Actor and His World* (London: Faber, 1951), facing page 33.

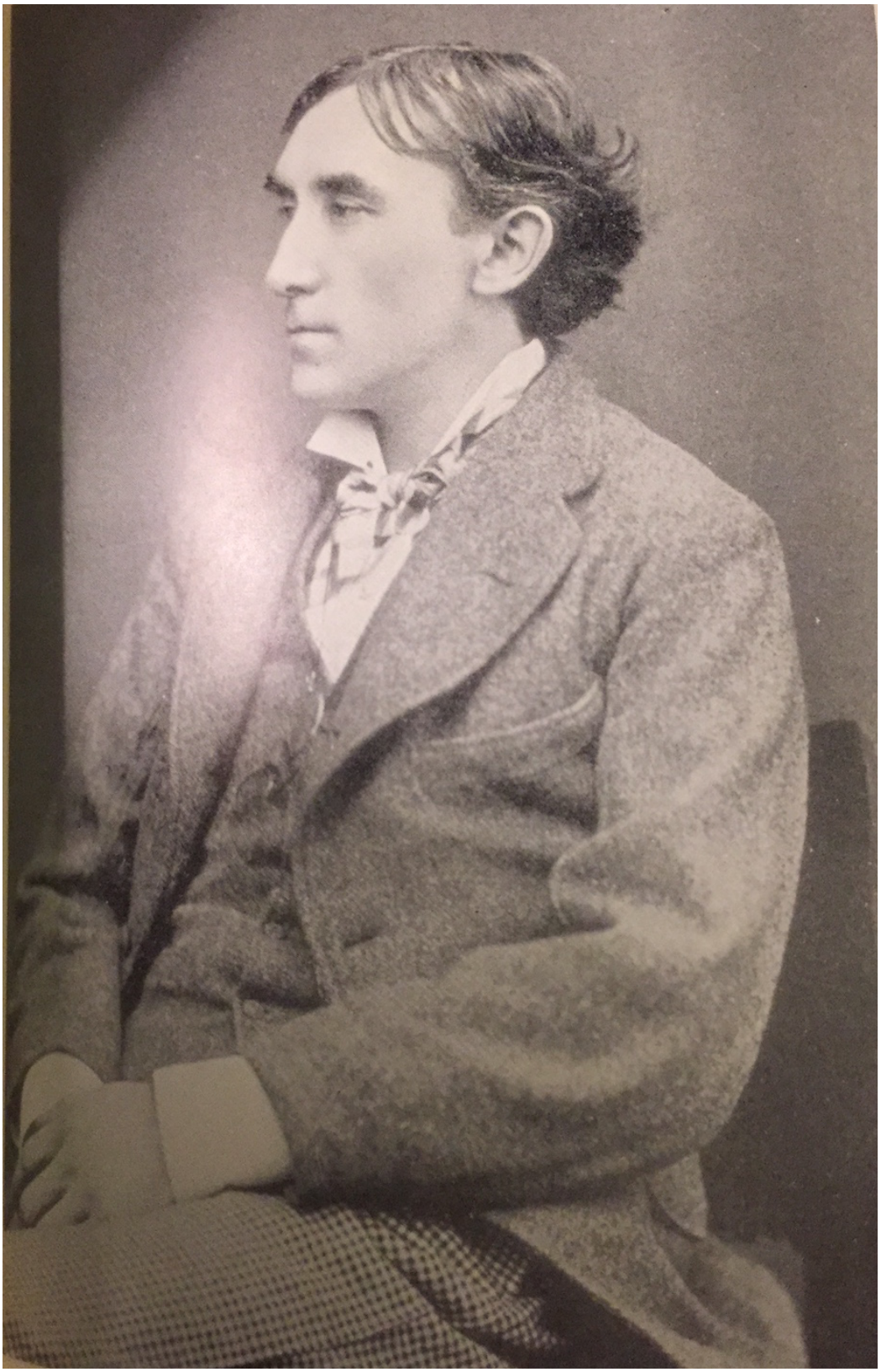

Figure 6

Henry Irving, photograph (early 1870s) reprinted in Jeffrey Richards, *Sir Henry Irving: A Victorian Actor and His World* (Hambledon: Continuum, 2006) plate 1, facing page 148.

Figure 7

'Sir John Everett Millais, 1st Bt.' by (George) Herbert Watkins, albumen print, (1857) NPG P301(36) © National Portrait Gallery, London

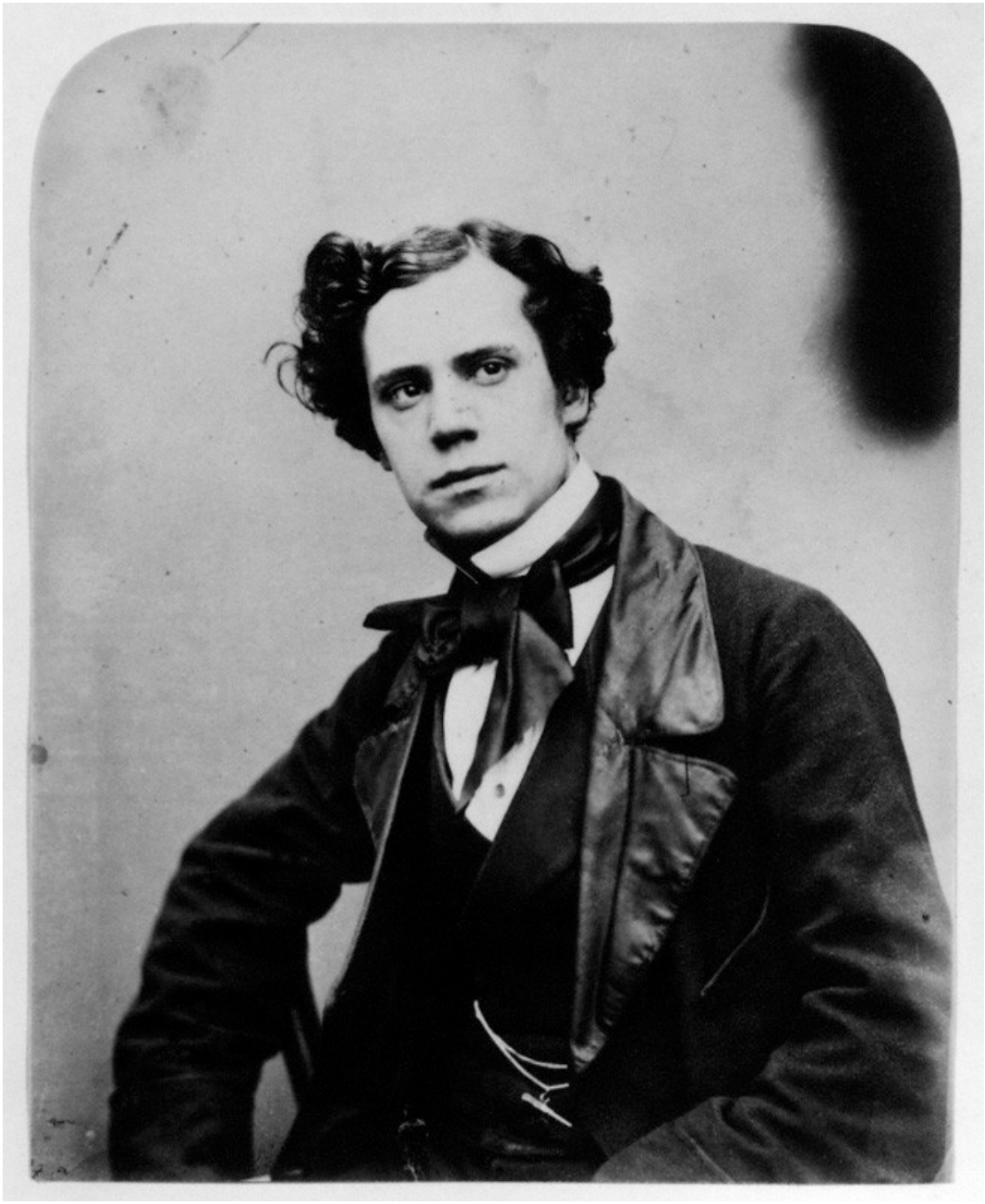

Figure 8

‘John Lawrence Toole’ by (George) Herbert Watkins, albumen print, arched top (late 1850s), NPG P301(137).

Figure 9

'Charles James Mathews' by Hennah & Kent, albumen carte-de-visite (1860s)
NPG x21241

Figure 10

'Charles James Mathews as Dazzle in *London Assurance*' by (George) Herbert Watkins albumen carte-de-visite, (1858), NPG x21240